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Supporting communities in development – tools & approaches

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Announcements

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Editorial
Like a duck to water: the *KM4D Journal*

Julie Ferguson and Sarah Cummings

> *In November 2004, a small group of members of the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) community of practice and others related to the field met in The Hague to discuss the possibility of starting an (e-)journal in the field of knowledge sharing in a development context. This idea came from a perceived need to capture and share, more formally, the knowledge and experiences being generated by diverse knowledge management approaches, South and North, and specifically by the KM4Dev community.*

This is how we introduced the new idea to the KM4Dev community in December 2004. When at the end of April 2005 guest editors of issue one and two conducted an After Action Review, something that had somehow disappeared off the radar came to light. Read the first paragraph again: 'a small group of KM4Dev members and others … met in The Hague *to discuss the possibility* of starting an e-journal…'

In fact, the *possibility* of starting the journal was never actually discussed – because all of a sudden, we were discussing the first issue, and the journal simply *was*! Here was a huge opportunity to capture worldwide knowledge on development issues, just waiting to be shared. It became apparent within a matter of weeks that the perceived need to 'do more' with the knowledge in the KM4Dev community was indeed justified. A quick market scan illustrated that there was a gap in the formal literature in terms of knowledge management/knowledge sharing for development, enabled by information and communication technologies (ICTs). Dozens of people turned out to be eager to fill this gap.

Feedback started pouring in, both positive and critical; others committed articles and offered peer support, eager to get involved with the new initiative. All in all, the community took to the idea of a community journal like a duck to water – albeit a very swift duck swimming in rapids. Barely six months later, issue one lies here in front of you, with issues two and three already on track: we proudly present the 'Knowledge Management for Development Journal' to be known as the *KM4D Journal*.

KM4D Journal

This new e-journal will offer practice-based cases, analysis and research concerning the role of knowledge in development processes, and will provide a forum for debate and exchange of ideas among practitioners, policymakers, academics and activists worldwide. It is an *open access* journal and is available on the INASP Journals and

Newsletters (INJOL) online platform at: http://www.km4dev.org/journal. Although focusing on the KM4Dev community, it aims to be a 'broad church', facilitating cross-fertilization between knowledge management and related fields, including information management.

The journal has three new editors-in-chief plus an Editorial Board. The Board is currently being formed but we envisage that will ultimately comprise 20-25 Board members. The majority of the board members will be members of the KM4Dev community who are international experts in this field.

We envisage that most issues, like this one, will be produced by Guest Editors. This means that any group of colleagues, interested in a specific subject area, can propose a thematic issue and compile papers on this theme. In this way, the second issue of the journal to appear in September 2005 will be focusing on 'Approaches to promote knowledge sharing in international development organizations' and will be edited by Guest Editors: Lucie Lamoureux, Nathan Russell, Simone Staiger-Rivas, Doug Horton, and Allison Hewlitt. Why have we chosen this decentralized construction? We have chosen it because it provides the greatest opportunity for participation in the journal by members of the KM4Dev community and others.

Another crucial element is the peer review process for this journal. Instead of a double blind, peer review process, we have chosen a 'peer support process' in which the reviewer will be made known to the author. We have done this for two reasons: firstly because most of the papers will be pre-selected, based on a 'call for papers'; and secondly because we aim to assist potential new, inexperienced authors with a greater degree of support and assistance than they would normally receive in a traditional peer review process.

This first issue

As a journal building primarily on the knowledge in the KM4Dev community, this first issue of the *KM4D Journal* takes community learning as its theme. Building on a September 2003 collaboration between Sarah, Julie and Lucie, this issue focuses on ICT-enabled communities in the field of international development, moving away from an anecdotal analysis of these communities towards a more vigorous, evidence-based and outcomes-based approach.

Since the 1990s, the role of networks or communities, made up of development professionals and their organizations, has received increasing attention. Such networks, including 'communities of ideas', 'communities of practice' or 'communities of purpose' have been used to upgrade the quality of development activities the impact of these development organizations; to facilitate a collective learning process; and to contribute of a 'shifting up' of development activities to national and international audiences.

As a result of increased adoption ICTs and particularly e-mail and groupware, existing and new networks have taken to online interaction and a world of virtual communities has grown exponentially over the past 10 years. Many development organizations are investing in these communities; but the cost-benefit from these

investments is by no means clear. Further, issues of inclusion and exclusion remain important in the wider development community. Barriers to access include language, gender and poverty. Technology both exacerbates and, at the same time, can be applied to help overcome these barriers.

In this context, contributors from North and South, including practitioners and researchers, share articles, stories, cases and notes on challenges, failures, lessons learned and successes pertaining to ICT-enabled communities, and their contribution to development processes. *Sarah Cummings* and *Arin van Zee* set the scene with a discussion of the terminology; *Nancy White* and *Siobhan Kimmerle* provide insightful guidance on getting the most out of communities of practice for development purposes. *Gerd Junne* and *Willemijn Verkoren* analyse the role of virtual communities in conflict prevention. *Gita Swamy*, illustrating how UNDP knowledge networks responded to the tsunami disaster, presents an exciting complement to this analysis. *Hebron Mwakalinga* addresses the question 'are online communities delivering?', analysing community learning in an international knowledge network of primarily developing countries. *Anne Hardon* shares a candid study illustrating the ups and downs of designing knowledge networks, whilst *Rohit Ramaswamy, Graeme Storer* and *Romeck Van Zeyl* identify sustainability factors for communities of practice. How does community learning contribute to the development process in the specific geo-political context of the Middle East and North Africa? The latter is analysed by *Erik Caldwell Johnson* and *Ramla Khalidi-Beyhum*.

Last but not least, the *Community Notes* section includes first, an interview with our fearless KM4Dev moderator, *Lucie Lamoureux*, disclosing the ins and outs of the KM4Dev community, and second, an analysis of a recent discussion thread by *Michael Gruber*. This discussion thread on the best 'location' of knowledge management in a development organization generated a lot of interest on KM4Dev.

All in all, we hope this first issue of the *KM4D Journal* offers a positive learning experience. We invite you to help us develop *KM4D Journal* to meet your needs as a medium for enhancing community learning and for more effectively capturing knowledge shared on KM4Dev. Please feel free to share your comments and discuss the ideas presented in the journal; we think there might be an appropriate forum for doing so on – well, use your imagination.

Julie Ferguson and Sarah Cummings
Guest Editors, Supporting communities in development – tools & approaches

Communities of practice and networks: reviewing two perspectives on social learning

Sarah Cummings and Arin van Zee

> *Social actors are continuously, either spontaneously or in a more organized way or both, building relationships with each other to create opportunities for joint learning, increasing their understanding and improving upon current practices.* (Engel 1997)

> *Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities: communities of practice.* (Wenger 1999)

This paper examines two different approaches used to describe and analyse similar phenomena: 'networks for learning' and 'communities of practice'. These approaches are both prevalent in the development discourse but they come from different traditions and strands of thinking. Nonetheless, they both offer a rich and stimulating perspective on how individuals and organisations are working together within the development process. The purpose of this article is mixed. Firstly, we aim to summarise current thinking on of both these approaches with the aim of making them both more accessible to development practitioners. Secondly, we will explore the similarities and differences between the two, aiming to establish linkages between the two. Thirdly, based on these linkages, we hope to be able to reconcile them to some extent as a way of getting the best out of them both. We will also be looking at the similarities and the differences between these approaches. Where is the challenge for development practice related to these concepts of social learning?

The paradigm of communities of practice comes from the knowledge management literature, which has its origin in business. Networks for learning are derived from the development literature and for that reason are ostensibly better suited to the development sector. Although these differences are striking, there are a number of similarities between these paradigms.

The first part of this paper on the development context illustrates that there is an increasing number of online communities and networks in development which are seen as a source of innovation in development and are receiving heavy investments from donors and other development organizations. Despite this optimism that such communities/networks have a role to play in development, they are a fairly new phenomenon and there has been no inventory of these networks/communities, there are few conclusions about their general characteristics and little reflection on how they are growing. Next, the second part will take a closer look at communities of practice: an introduction to the concept; characteristics of successful communities of

practice; the theoretical background; and the importance of communities of practice for development. The third part will then provide an introduction to networking for learning; characteristics of successful networks; the theoretical background; and the importance of networks for development. In the fourth part, a comparison is made of the two paradigms, identifying differences and similarities.

Part I: The development context

Since the 1990s, the role of networks of development organisations has received increasing attention. Such development networks, including so-called 'communities of ideas' (Engel 1997), 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1997), 'formal knowledge networks' and 'virtual teams' (Willard 2001), 'knowledge networks' (Box 1990), 'thematic networks' (IICD website), 'virtual knowledge communities' (Cummings et al 2005), 'international networks for knowledge sharing' (Resource Centre for Development, Skat Foundation 2004) and 'thematic groups' (World Bank website), are widespread within and between development organizations. The substantial variety of different names for what are effectively similar entities is illustrative of substantial creativity. Organizations and groups of development professionals are taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the new technology to initiate a vast range of communities and networks. Such communities and networks have been used to upgrade the quality of the activities, outputs and impact of development organisations, to facilitate a collective learning process, and to contribute to a 'shifting up' of development activities to an international audience (Engel 1997). A substantial number of development organisations are positively exploiting the potential of these online networks and virtual communities. An example of the growth in the number of communities can be demonstrated with the example of Dgroups (http://www.dgroups.org), a platform of collaborative tools and services established by a group of development organisations. In July 2003, Dgroups supported 360 virtual communities, containing 8125 members. Now, April 2005, there are 1194 groups with 33154 members.

Part II: Communities of practice

And what if, in addition, we assumed that learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing? What kind of understanding would such a perspective yield on how learning takes place and on what is required to support it? (Wenger 1997)

It has both the eye-opening character of novelty and the forgotten familiarity of obviousness – but perhaps that is the mark of our most useful insights. (Wenger 1997)

Wenger argues that communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better. They include families developing their own practices, routines and rituals; workers organizing their lives with their immediate colleagues and customers; students at school; bands rehearsing in garages; recovering alcoholics at weekly meetings; and scientists. These communities are not generally computer-mediated although they can be: 'Across the world wide web of computers, people congregate in

virtual spaces and developing shared ways of pursuing their common interests' (Wenger 1997). They are very informal and pervasive. Membership of multiple communities is the norm: some of which one is a core member, and some of which membership is more peripheral.

To define a community of practice, Wenger argues that three characteristics are crucial:

The domain
A community of practice has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. Members value their collective competence and learn from each other, even though few people outside the group may value or even recognize their expertise.

The community
Within their domain of interest, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. However, members of a community of practice do not necessarily work together on a daily basis. To illustrate this point, Wenger cites the example of the Impressionist painters who used to meet in cafes and studios to discuss the style of painting they were inventing together. These interactions were essential to making them a community of practice even though they often painted alone.

The practice
A community of practice is not merely a community of interest, for example people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Key to the paradigm is the fact that members of a community of practice are *practitioners* [our emphasis]. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems, namely a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

It is the combination of these three elements (domain, community, practice) that constitutes a community of practice. And it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community. Wenger argues that communities of practice are not called that in all organizations. They are often known as learning networks, thematic groups, or tech clubs, a similar phenomenon to that outlined in development above. He is also not prescriptive about this term and using no others: 'The kind of social theory of learning I propose is not a replacement for other theories of learning that address different aspects of the problem' (Wenger 1997). Wenger here is pointing out that he does not see that his approach should be exclusive, something we should bear in mind.

In development, a typical community of practice comprises a group of practitioners focusing on a specific subject field, facilitating sharing of information and skills. They can be members of the same organization. However, the great strength of such communities is that, enabled by new ICTs in the form of groupware, they are able to facilitate contact between practitioners working in different organizations in different parts of the world. Boxes 1 and 2 provide two examples of communities of practice.

Characteristics of successful communities of practice

The characteristics of successful communities of practice have been identified by Wenger (1997), Carpio Tam (2003), the World Bank (www.worldbank.org), and the US Agency for International Development (www.usaid.org). Rather than listing these characteristics individually, they are summarized in Table 1. Here, knowledge sharing within communities of practice is tabulated in terms of different components of communities: information, knowledge, and social and organizational aspects.

Box 1

HIF-Net
http://www.dgroups.org/groups/hif-net

Facilitated by INASP, HIF-net is an e-discussion list with approximately 1250 members from 130 different countries. It is community of practice which provides a neutral focal point for discussion of issues relating to the practice of access and use of information by healthcare professionals. The objectives are to:

1: Facilitate contact and sharing of skills and experience among those who produce and use health information. HIF-Net seeks to generate debate and facilitate partnerships, leading to the development of new approaches, involving printed and/or electronic resources, to meet the needs of different audiences.

2: Promote greater understanding of the needs of health information users. HIF-net aims to improve the knowledge and understanding of participants about the needs of health information users in developing countries and the most cost-effective ways to meet those needs.

3: Advocating to decision makers for effective communication strategies to promote the best use of health information. HIF-net facilitates advocacy to policy makers, publishers and other interested parties with regard to health information.

Box 2

LEAP IMPACT
www.dgroups.org/groups/leap/impact

LEAP IMPACT is a community of practice for development-related information professionals. The 'practice' concerned is the evaluation of information projects, products and services. Coordinated by the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development (CTA), the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) and IICD, it has been involved in developing the 'smart tools' for evaluation to be published in 2005. LEAP IMPACT currently has 154 members from a range of geographically dispersed development institutions.

Table 1: Knowledge sharing within communities of practice

Different components of the community	**What is being shared**	**The role of what is being shared**	**The result of knowledge sharing through communities of practice**		
			Short-term	**Medium-term**	**Long-term**
Information component	Documentation of projects, articles and links	Improved access to information	Better informed dialogue Better informed decision-making	Improved approaches Improved programmes Improved projects	Better development outcomes
	Re-use of assets				
Knowledge sharing component	Facilitating quick response for questions and answers	Enhances formal training			
	Access to pool of expert knowledge	Facilitates progress from 'novice' to 'expert'			
	Discussion of current issues	Mapping of knowledge			
Social component	Personal contacts	Increased satisfaction Sense of belonging	Increased commitment Increased engagement		
	Increased social interaction				
Organizational component	Increased synergy				
	Increased coordination				

The theoretical background

> *I am trying to understand the connection between knowledge, community, learning and identity. The basic idea is that human knowing is fundamentally a social act. This simple observation has profound implications for the way we think of and attempt to support learning.* (Wenger 1997)

Social scientists have used versions of the concept of community of practice for a variety of analytical purposes, but the origin and primary use of the concept has been in learning theory. Anthropologist Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger coined the term while studying apprenticeship as a learning model. People usually think of apprenticeship as a relationship between a student and a master, but studies of apprenticeship reveal a more complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place mostly with journeymen and more advanced apprentices. The term community of practice was coined to refer to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. Once the concept was articulated, Lave and Wenger started to see these communities everywhere, even when no formal apprenticeship system existed.
Wenger's approach is situated in four premises:

- We are social beings and this is a central aspect of learning;
- Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises;
- Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, namely active engagement in the world; and
- Meaning – our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful – is ultimately what learning is to produce.

The intellectual heritage from which these premises are derived is highly diverse. The main tradition to which this work belongs is the social theory of leaning which is located at the intersection of intellectual traditions along two main axes: the vertical axis provided by the clash between theories of social structure and theories of situated experience; and a horizontal axis between theories of social practice and theories of identity. Diagonal axes are provided by theories of collectivity; theories of subjectivity; theories of power; and theories of meaning.

The importance of communities of practice for development

Saunders (2000) argues that it is possible to conceptualise development-related evaluation as a series of 'knowledge-based practices'. In his case, knowledge-based practices form the resources of communities of practice: a group of practising evaluators. One part of this is the idea of 'apprenticeship' with novices being 'inducted' or 'socialized' into a group of practicing evaluators. Based on this example, communities of practice are very relevant to development because development is a series of knowledge-based practices.

Although we mention above that communities and networks are identified in different ways throughout the development context, it is probably useful to look at the approach of two organizations that do use the terminology of communities of practice.

The US Agency of International Development (USAID) defines communities of practice as:

> *Informal groups (organized around specific Agency functions, roles or topics such as Programme Planning and Strategic Planning, Contracting Officers, Gender) of USAID practitioners able to share the knowledge and expertise needed to more effectively perform their jobs.*

Communities of practice are seen as 'organizational techniques' that speed up the application of innovative ideas for Agency decision-making, learning, and partnering to achieve USAID objectives and goals. Communities of practice facilitate improved access to development and operational knowledge; improved mentoring; improved knowledge sharing; more rapid problem resolution; better introduction of new employees to the Agency via their support from communities of practice; broadening of personal networks to Agency-wide communities; improved employee morale and retention; and enhanced social capital (USAID 2004)

Within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), internal communities of practice exist at the regional and global level. In regional networks, staff shares region-specific information such as Bureau policies and directives, and regional and local sources of expertise and information, including those in region specific languages (Arabic, Russian, Spanish, and French). In global networks, staff shares information of relevance across regions. Global networks are established and guided by facilitators working in the respective substantive thematic areas at Headquarters. Regional networks are managed by the SURF offices.
http://www.undp.org/policy/networking.htm

Part III: Networks for learning

> *The network paradigm is a seductive vision to solve all the above ills in one go: why not connect the North with the South and cross-connect all the involved actors with networks? With such linkages, activities could be coordinated, knowledge could be shared between North and South as well as within and among the countries of the South, best practices could be exchanged, and common standards and procedures developed. Many have succumbed to this alluring vision and countless networks exist in the development sector.*
> (Resource Centre for Development, Skat Foundation 2004)

Theoretical background

The concept of *networking for learning* can be rooted in the tradition of agricultural knowledge systems (Engel (1997) and soft-system analysis (Checkland and Scholes). According to Engel (1997) one of the main problems constraining the development of sustainable solutions is the one-sidedness of many social and institutional learning processes. Many theories and practices promote linear and exclusive ways of thinking and one-dimensional 'rationalisation' rather than empowering people to apply multiple rationalities, so that they can adapt themselves effectively to rapid changing circumstances. Innovation however has to be approached as a process of interplay among social actors from relevant social practices. This interplay is a diffuse social process which leads to new or modified problem definitions and practical solutions. It can be qualified as networking in-and-between relevant social practices. Over time,

this process of networking may lead to the gradual development of a pattern of more or less durable relationships among a number of social actors who perceive each other as relevant. Therefore, we need to introduce the concept of networking (Engel, 1993). Advantages of this are that the concept of networking entails explicit recognition of ourselves as social beings, and it is connected to our concern for sustainability, since this can only be achieved where people have worked out a way of interacting with each other.

Networking: a buzzword in international development

The interest in networking for learning has been growing during recent years. The term 'network' is now a buzzword in the field of international development (Perkin and Court). Creech & Willard (2001) recognise four fundamental drivers behind this interest:

- The *emergence of ICTs* in the 1980s and 1990s has made (global) networking much easier. Global information exchange and learning with people from different parts of the world has become accessible for large parts of the world.
- A *sense of urgency*: the growing complexity and inter-relatedness of major social, economic and environmental problems and the failure of some of the former approaches to solve issues like HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation and poverty alleviation makes multi-stakeholder and widespread learning unavoidable and highly needed.
- A *sense of frustration*: among public and academic actors because of the lack of impact that relevant research has had on public policy recently.
- Due to the *private sector experiments* with knowledge management and the impact on the private sector, the public sector and civil society organisations have also become interested in it.

What do we mean by networking for learning?

Networking is a common phenomenon, not only in development practice. What is clear is that networking is about organisations, institutions and individual actors joining forces around a common concern. It is about building relationships with other independent actors to (often) share knowledge, goods and experiences and to learn from each other with a common goal in mind (Padron (1991), Plucknett (1990), Engel (1993)). According to Pinzás & Ranaboldo (2003) the core business of many network practices in development cooperation has proven to be joint learning and advocacy. Their evidence suggests that all the rest is instrumental to these two spheres of joint action in networks. That is why we constantly speak about networking for learning.

From the perspective of civil society, Engel (1993) mentions three fundamental drivers to networking, partly overlapping with the ones Creech & Willard propose:

- Firstly, civil society actors want to *upgrade* their performance through collective action, when they perceive a lack of access to relevant knowledge to be a critical factor hampering their work. Networks are strong because they fortify creativity and critical thinking through dialogue and exchange (see also: Nunez & Wilson-Grau (2003)).
- Secondly they want to *upstream* in terms of analysis and activities, to join forces and to search jointly for new ways of understanding and intervening in

circumstances that are complex and defy simple analysis. Sharing strategies and deepening understanding by addressing global problems through knowledge of their local, national and regional contexts is possible (see also: Nunez & Wilson-Grau (2003)).

- Thirdly they want to *upshift* their impact, to take the focus of their activities to a higher policy level, enabling them to participate in the public and/or government debate about development and to effectively influence policymaking.

Characteristics of successful networking

Networking often goes through a process of institutionalisation. Of primary importance in this process is to save the essence of networking, its *vitality* (Wielinga, 2001). Each network develops structure as a complex of agreements, procedures, culture and material circumstances. It is important for a networking process not to lose its flexibility – which can happen when procedures and controls are becoming predominant and vitality, enthusiasm and satisfaction flow away (see Wielinga, 2001). To keep networking for joint learning vital and striving one can find in the literature certain elements of networking need to be taken into account. We will mention some of them here, derived from the article written by Engel and van Zee (2004):

Maintain pertinence

This relates to the adequacy and relevance of what the network does within a particular socio-political context. The conclusion of Pinzás and Ranaboldo (2003) is not to aim for a single shared meaning. Rather a lively debate on the pertinence of a network is important. According to them, the more networks understand and effectively develop themselves as spaces for innovation, experimentation and learning, and demonstrate their capability for advocacy, the more successful they are in continually renovating and revitalising themselves within an ever changing development context, and hence, ensure their pertinence.

Ensure added value

From the research of again Pinzás and Ranaboldo (2003), it becomes clear that those networks that focus, whether concentrating on a limited number of well-specified themes or limiting themselves to a well-defined sphere of social and political interaction, have generally achieved much more visible results, both internally and externally and have been able to obtain a higher degree of commitment from their membership.

Daring to share – atmosphere of openness

Although this sounds rather obvious, in practice this means that participants must have confidence in their work and 'dare to share' with others (Padron, 1991). A network must be characterised by an atmosphere of openness among participants which allow them to admit mistakes and to learn from them (LEISA, 1992). Networks cannot flourish without this trust.

Skills, access and time/money

A presupposition of networking is that participants have the capacities to contribute: skills, access and time/money (see Plucknett (1990), Creech & Willard (2001) and Nelson & Farrington (1994)). If projects have little or none in-built space for

reflection and learning, of course one can not be expected to engage effectively in a learning network.

Commitment – motivated by self-interest
Participants must consider the priorities of the network as their own ones. They must be motivated by self-interest because networking is a potential added-value to their daily work. According to Padron (1991), the golden rule for success is letting a network start from its own resources. Initial self-reliance guarantees continuity, independent of whether funding in a later stadium is needed.

Shared problem or goal
Although discussion on pertinence leads to vital networks, it needs to be balanced by a common vision / shared goals among the members of a network. To generate useful interaction – in particular when individuals are working in different institutional and geographical settings – (an) issue(s) of common interest need to be identified (Nelson & Farrington 1994).

Clarity of focus and planning
To be effective, a network has to focus on a limited number of topics and to prioritise these (Guijt et al. 2003), otherwise participants of the network tend to put their own daily institutional priorities ahead of their network obligations.

Flexible internal management and participation
The success of a network depends more than anything else on the role of the network '*animator*' (Padron, 1991). The role of such an animator is (a) to manage the flow of information across the network; (b) to keep participants engaged; (c) balance consultation with members with pushing forward the delivery on network plans; and (d) to monitor the financial health of the network (Creech and Willard 2001). Important are also participation in decision-making and a non-directive management style. After all: the participants work within a network, not for it.

Network orientation
An excessive attention to learning only from one's own experiences and debates may at certain points lead to isolation and blind network members with respect to relevant experiences elsewhere. Adequate information systems need to be developed to make sure that learning processes and advocacy activities within the network are well endowed with alternative views and options (Engel 2002).

The importance of networking for development
Recent field research by Pinzás and Ranaboldo (2003) points out that networking knowledge for development produces its most significant results if the network develops itself into a space for innovation, experimentation and learning. The sum total of learning-oriented networking initiatives in any particular field or region provides civil society with a critical 'cortex' that enables it to go beyond the intuitive and beyond individual interests. It helps channelling the knowledge and experience gained through local initiatives, into higher levels of shared understanding and improved policy advocacy. In a way, it provides the meshwork of thinkers and doers that permits civil society to learn from experience, to develop its own knowledge base and to transform it into original policy proposals, without having to adhere to 'one-size-fits-all' approaches and solutions. In that sense *learning-oriented networks*

represent civil society's answer to the challenges of the emerging knowledge society (see also Engel and van Zee 2004). Donors should recognise this central role of networking initiatives in boosting the knowledge base, learning processes and the civil society actors' capacity to generate and advocate proposals, and relate their funding to the relative importance they attach to it. Capacity development, institution building, advocacy and societal change, to name just a few, are unthinkable without a considerable investment in improving networking and learning among relevant development actors. Donors should invest in learning-oriented networking amongst their partners because they want to enable civil society both globally and locally to play a strong role in shaping the ideas and knowledge that determine our future. Besides, such investments are vital to sustain their own learning; sponsoring learning-oriented networking can not be lacking in donors' global knowledge for development strategies.

Part IV: A comparison of the two paradigms

Although stemming from different traditions and strands of thinking, there are, at the same time, common elements at a fundamental level. These fundamental, common elements demonstrate the close relationship between these approaches, despite the fact that they have been developed independently in different subject areas. Both networks for learning and communities of practice are founded on conceptions of social learning. This fundamental orientation is probably one of the reasons for a large number of related similarities. Engel argues that learning is a complex activity that manifests itself in a relatively stable change in behaviour of a person or a group of persons. For Wenger, mutual engagement within communities is what leads to social learning. The similarities between the two approaches will be explored below.

Firstly both conceptions of networking for learning and communities of practice argue that that the main motivation is wanting to do something better in response to a changing environment. Development networks (Engel, 1993) are used for upgrading, upstreaming and upshifting development initiatives. As Wenger notes:

> *Even in a setting so historically and institutionally determined, communities must tune their practice constantly in their attempt to get the job done.*

Secondly, both approaches are looking squarely at both practice and practitioners. Engel argues that networking for learning considers the ways actors organize themselves to learn, how they network, cooperate and communicate for innovation, what hampers their capacity to learn and what helps them to learn new practices faster. These actors and stakeholders are practitioners. People are at the core of networking for learning: not as passive recipients but as active, knowledgeable participants who can arrive at decisions. In networking for learning, 'actor' refers to an individual person or to a group, organization or network: all interact, taking and implementing decisions on the basis of their own perceptions, interests, agendas, understandings and the opportunities they are able to see. For Wenger, practice is the 'way of talking about shared historical and social resources, frameworks and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.'
Thirdly, both approaches refer to the importance of boundaries, peripheries, linkages and interfaces, although the terminology employed is slightly different. For Engel,

linkages comprise connections between actors that allow the exchange of resources such as information, money, labour and other material or immaterial assets, such as power, status, or 'goodwill' while interfaces comprise a shared boundary between actors where interactions may occur. Some of the interfaces are strategic. For Wenger, as communities of practice differentiate themselves, they comprise a complex social landscape of shared practices, boundaries, peripheries, overlaps, connections and encounters.

Fourthly, both approaches are focusing on participation as an important characteristic of communities and networks. For Engel, participation comprises the involvement of actors in the process of making decisions that will affect them, including what is to be done and how. For Wenger, participation (or mutual engagement) refers to the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises. In communities of practice, participation forms a complex duality with reification – 'the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'', such as tools, symbols, stories, terms, and concepts – which are both needed for distinguishing meaning. Strongly related to participation is the notion of volition, described by Engel. Volition emphasises both sense-making (creating comprehension and purpose) and commitment to stick to decisions that have been made. It also involves fluidity: an informed and thoughtful volition which is never in error and which is always subject to challenge and re-formulation. In addition, volition shows purpose and determination, even if no objects and results are specified in advance. Volition cannot take place in a social vacuum: it relies on mutual engagement to make it possible.

Differences

Despite these similarities, there is a substantial difference in emphasis. Influenced by Senge's learning organisation, Wenger looks at communities of practice within an organization, emphasizing the development of practices and social learning. For Engel, the main focus is on innovation. It would probably be fair to say that Wenger is more interested in the process of how new practices are developed while Engel and colleagues are more interested in problem identification and the output of this process, namely innovation. However, this does not mean that these two approaches are incompatible but rather, they are taking a slightly different perspective on the same phenomenon.

As has been mentioned in section I on the development context, the different terminologies of networks and communities often appear to be used interchangeably. However, the Resource Centre for Development of the Skat Foundation (2004) finds a simple distinction between the two:

> *…the term "network" is used for institutionalised partnerships between institutions or organizations and may even take the form of a legal entity. The network partners are still autonomous and contribute their resources voluntarily. They share a common vision, objectives and rules. The network partners have a set of common activities and regular events are organized. According to this definition, networks are more institutionalised and organised than unregulated exchange mechanisms or communities of practice.*

Thus, networks are more institutionalized while communities of practice are 'unregulated exchange mechanisms'. Wenger emphasizes that communities of practice are 'informal', they involve in organic ways that tend to escape formal descriptions and control. In Wenger's words,

> *The landscape of practice is therefore not congruent with reified structures of institutional affiliations, divisions and boundaries. It is not independent of these institutional structures, but neither is it reducible to them.*

We would, however, argue that, rather than representing two separate entities, communities of practice and networks are part of a continuum, ranging from informality - spontaneous groups of professionals forming a community of practice - to formality, more institutionalised in the form of a network, including a 'management unit' whose role it is to facilitate the networking process. Contrary to almost all communities of practice, most networking is characterised by more objectives than learning together alone. Some development networks for example focus, besides the aim of learning together, on the provision of services (providing documentation and training to third people) or have a clear advocacy objective, with activities facilitated by the network with the aim of influencing the public and political opinion.

Despite the difference in level of institutionalisation, we have seen that both networks (and in particular those we are talking about, the ones with a clear focus on learning) and communities of practices share the same principles. In short: a shared domain of interest, forming a community on the basis of common interests, while all participants are practitioners. Taking the perspective of a continuum recognises the common ground of the two concepts and makes it easier to reconcile these two approaches, which come from very different disciplines. It challenges both the proponents of both approaches to try to take the best out of each other.

Part V: Conclusions

The origin of this paper was an irritation that the two approaches, communities of practice and networking, were similar but that they were not learning from each other. We were also motivated by a slight concern that the two approaches were responsible for a certain sort of chaos and that they needed to be regimented and reconciled in some way. A review of the literature, however, led us to the conclusion that, although coming from different traditions and strands of thinking, both approaches are demonstrative of a tremendous creativity and that they are not incompatible. We have come to the conclusion that there are fundamental similarities in the two approaches which stem from their respective focus on social learning. Rather than representing two separate entities, we argue that they form a continuum of communities and networks of increasing formality, ranging from informal communities of practice to highly formalized networks with a huge variation in between. Indeed, these approaches are compatible, offering slightly different perspectives on similar and related phenomena. In recent years, the development arena has seen a huge blossoming of these communities and networks as development practitioners and different organizations rapidly take advantage of the opportunities for innovation provided by these communities of practice and networks for learning.

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Abstract
This paper examines the similarities between the concepts of 'community of practice' (Wenger 1997) and 'networking for learning' (Engel and Salomon 1997, and others). These concepts come from divergent traditions: the former has its roots in knowledge

management and the latter comes from agricultural knowledge systems and soft-systems analysis. Although stemming from different strands of thinking, there are some common concepts and common elements. For both approaches, the characteristics, theoretical background and importance for development are explored. Next, similarities based on conceptions of social learning are explored. Finally, it is argued that communities of practice and networks for learning are part of the same continuum with varying degrees of formality, ranging from informal communities of practice to highly formal networks for learning.

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Little steps to lofty goals: keys to successful community learning for civil society development

Nancy White and Siobhan Kimmerle

Introduction

> *And in the sweetness of friendship, let there be laughter and the sharing of pleasures. For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.* (Gibran 1923)

Post-Soviet Armenia is a land in the midst of change. In every sector, national identity, infrastructure and politics are being rebuilt. New ideas are everywhere, along with fear and resistance. How can Armenian citizens help shape change to address their needs and desires? How can learning with and from each other help support positive change? Lofty goals indeed but little things can give context and support lofty goals. The Armenian School Connectivity Programme has demonstrated this by helping create a connected social fabric through learning communities across the country to help people build their own futures and change their country into what they want it to be.

Change is rooted in learning new things, discovering new ways and infusing them across a group. E. M. Rogers' classic literature on diffusion of innovation suggests that 'getting a new idea adopted, even when it has obvious advantages, is very difficult' (Rogers 1995, p1). This is true in Armenia because of the scale of changes in the post-Soviet era. Learning to change means far more than rebuilding decrepit educational systems. It means changing the way communities identify and meet their common needs and rebuild their civic identities. The authors believe learning is at the heart of change. However, the learners are often not in the same place. When the need to learn transcends their geographic confines, the promise of distributed learning communities begins to dawn.

Learning together as a distributed group suggests a focus on technology or complicated processes. One needs tools and connectivity, but these alone do not create learning in a group: they are simply the substrate. Content plays a role, but without the context for social learning, it too, lies inert. Learning as a group requires human interaction based on purpose, grounded in the social fabric of relationships, and shared in a manner that makes sense to the members of the group. Compared to the enormous challenge of wiring a nation to access the Internet, these might be considered 'little things'. Yet it is through these little things that a group crystallizes and learns together. Outreach and relationship building create connections that stimulate community learning for development and change. Support from funders and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) helps, but real forward momentum comes in the confluence of community-determined purpose, technique, and the 'little things [in which] the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.' These many factors, woven together in an organic process, constitute the basis for sustainable impact.

Roots of learning: the Internet Community Development in the Caucasus (ICD) Programme

Project Harmony's Armenia School Connectivity Programme (ASCP) (http://www.projectharmony.am) has roots deep in a smaller project, the Internet Community Development in the Caucasus (ICD) Programme in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, three post-Soviet republics in the Southern Caucasus region.[1] Roots hold context, experience, relationship and trust, and create momentum and guidance for the learning journey. In this case they were central to the success of ASCP. It was through reflection on these roots that the ASCP project started to fully appreciate and be able to share the lessons gleaned through their successful community development initiatives.

The ICD Programme was designed to promote the use of the Internet as a democracy-building and community-organizing tool for professionals fostering the development of business support, refugee issues, and assistance to internally displaced persons. The program's goals were to develop two distinct online communities serving the development of small businesses and organizations that aid refugees and internally displaced persons. The first objective was to identify information needs and strategies for making better use of existing Internet access and technology. The second was to promote dialogue between those building the Internet infrastructure and community leaders in the small business and humanitarian NGO sectors.

The ICD Programme started by exploring 'online communities' as a concept and then sought to understand how to apply them to local project goals. First the participating NGO and small/medium enterprise organizations needed to learn how to do this 'online stuff', from understanding tools to techniques of online interaction. This initial learning phase was done across groups and organizations. Staff and ten key community members were trained in online interaction through a two-week online workshop. They built a basic set of skills, and became a confident core of targeted early adopters of online tools. The first set of relationships was established between Project Harmony, community organizations and the trainer.

A month later, a five-day face-to-face (F2F) workshop for ten participants from each of the three republics introduced the same online interaction concepts along with a series of application-related topics (marketing, job development, etc.). Local professional capacity was built to use and create multilingual online resources such as online newsletters, discussion lists, interactive websites, and web chats.

Seeds of community

Two things became clear. First, it was found that in learning to 'do' online communities, the seeds of actual communities were planted. Initially, many questioned that there could be collaboration across three politically tense national groups in the Southern Caucasus, yet the network did form across political lines. Second, the blend of online and F2F was instrumental. The F2F affirmed that the

[1] For the full story of ICD, please see http://www.fullcirc.com/Project Harmony/changinglenses.htm

online connections created viable relationships. The online work accelerated learning and formation of relationships, allowing deeper work to occur F2F. Each experience supported the other.

People found it essential to learn together in order to achieve their goals. And to learn with and from each other, they had to connect in some way, to form short and long-term affiliations that could stretch over the geographical, cultural and political boundaries of the region. Theory was quickly turned in to practice. The ICD Programme raised awareness of the Internet's potential for more than simple information exchange.

After the training phase, three formal online events were structured around community and organizational issues. This approach focused first on the technology, which had meaning for a single sector of the community, commonly referred to as the technology 'early adopters'. The training stimulated the early adopters to think more widely about online interaction as a tool for achieving their organizational or community purposes – an important shift which later allowed the easier inclusion of those less interested in the technology and more on meeting community needs.

Explicit learning from the ICD Programme

The importance of being able to talk about online communications and community

- **Move from theory to practice** - Talking about online communication in real concrete ways is difficult. The more concrete local examples one can use, the easier it is to start discussion practice and application.
- **Check for understanding across languages and culture** - Find and use good local language examples. Use graphics and screen shots and have handouts with example sites and URLs. Translate terminology and build a glossary.
- **From the start, involve local people who have some online experience** - Local experience makes a big difference when trying to explain the process of online communication. If it's not there, build it.
- **Articulate the purpose and values** - Underlying the application of online tools, both to inform the design process and to show the value of the application. This moves from 'tools as cool' to strategic tool application.
- **Keep it human** – Don't lose sight of the human/facilitation aspects of online interaction. It is not just about technology.

The ICD Programme ended in June of 2001. The concepts needed more practice and application to take firm root. But the exposure was sufficient to plant the seeds. Participants from the 2001 online and offline training continued to build cross-national relationships in the Southern Caucasus. An online conference on prevention of domestic violence (http://www.fullcirc.com/community/phdvconferencereportfull.htm) in Georgia, organized by Polina Makievsky (then Project Harmony Georgia Country Director) in 2002, showed that an online event provided advocates, new and experienced, with an

opportunity to learn from one another and improve their activities to benefit their communities. Makievsky later took the concept to a domestic violence prevention effort in the USA and used an online conference to share experiences with a global community of prevention experts. Some unanticipated capacity building side benefits emerged and became instrumental to ASCP later success. Project Harmony staff themselves adopted the tools and practices to support their own work. So the story grows as we move forward to 2003, to Yerevan, Armenia.

Armenia School Connectivity Programme

Armenia is a small country bordering Turkey, Georgia and Iran, which re-emerged after the end of the Soviet era in 1991. It has a tradition of scientific excellence and valuing education. Facing a weak economy and political uncertainty, as in other former Soviet republics, Armenia was left with a well-educated and highly skilled workforce, a valued but dilapidated education system, and a nation eager for the benefits expected from independence. The communications infrastructure was in a state of disrepair and the existing government telecommunications monopoly offered minimal improvement.
The American Government provides significant aid to support Armenia's economic development and political stability. One ambitious initiative was the ASCP. The ASCP and the ICD Programme are both programmes of the US Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), implemented by Project Harmony with online facilitation and event planning training components conducted by Full Circle Associates.

While the ICD Programme focused on building online communities, ASCP focused on the big and little steps needed to reach the lofty goal of 'supporting the integration of educational technologies to strengthen democracy and support civil society and cultural understanding.' Clearly it would be impossible to integrate educational technologies if no such technologies existed. Technology had to be made available. So the first big step was to build a network of online schools. Classrooms with computers and Internet connections, staffed by trained educators, were established and became the foundations of a unified network of over 250 Armenian schools covering all 11 *marz* (regions).[2] This grounded the project by establishing hardware and connectivity.

[2] ECA funding has been provided to connect a network of 350 schools by Autumn 2004. Initially 24 schools independently connected were adopted into a network with 35 newly established online schools in 2001. Supplemental funding expanded the network to 120 schools and the final expansion targeted a network of 350 schools. Online collaborative projects are also conducted within the Azerbaijan School Connectivity Program, funded by the US Department of State ECA and implemented by Project Harmony. The 2002-2003 academic year collaborative projects are a partnership between Project Harmony and Connected Minds (www.connectedminds.org). For more information on collaborative projects see http://www.projectharmony.am/news.html?l=en and http://www.ascp.am/en/collaborative.html?PHPSESSID=171c4dc05267a07eb5ce013160829e3c. Some of the initial stories can be accessed at http://www.ascp.am/en/community.html?PHPSESSID=541e237ac4e3eab57f997ede1002f74e

Layered approach to training

Hardware does not create learning communities. As the infrastructure was put in place, the programme moved beyond hardware and Internet connectivity. Site staff (those responsible for maintaining the centre, school website, and all training for the centre) received extensive free training at school-based ASCP classrooms together with students and teachers of the host and neighbouring schools. The training reflected a conscious decision to build local capacity and quick self-sufficiency in the basics of administering local networks. Self-sufficiency was seen as a first step towards sustainability. The training equipped future site staff with four types of skills: computer use, basic Internet use, web design, and network administration. The first three were intended as Training of Trainer courses for site staff to take back to their students, teachers, and community members. Network administration was designed to train advanced network administrators, but due to the low initial experience levels, the course was more successful in offering exposure and some basic troubleshooting procedures.

As the programme moved into more remote areas, it was challenging to find staff with exposure to technology beyond limited experience with outdated and broken machines. Eventually there emerged a basic course for training future staff before sending them to the four standard trainings. It became clear that the trainings needed to be layered to address diverse needs and experiences. Training may have been a big thing, but the subtle little thing was finding the right mix in each situation.

Building confidence among educators

Skills had to be grounded in confidence and applied to ‘real work.’ Teachers would not integrate any technology components into their lesson planning until they gained some confidence in their basic skills. Through practice with site staff, teachers reached a comfort level, developing the ability to team with the site staff in conducting learning activities in the classroom as well as a genuine interest in integrating technology into their lessons. Little victories built confidence.

Support and nurturing of teacher and staff skills provided another form of context. School principal support was critical. Until the school principal voiced encouragement for teachers to prioritize computer trainings as part of their own professional development, and recognized how this was integral to improving the overall education offered in the school, teachers rarely displayed eagerness. In one case, it was the experience of going to another country to see first hand different educational approaches that transformed a principal into a strong supporter of teacher development and educational reform within his school. This subsequently raised the profile of the principal in the community, garnering further support for his school.

Blending and practice

This exchange of ideas and experience was also the context for ASCP virtual exchanges and collaborative projects. These online experiences offered early exposure to boundary-spanning collaboration with minimal cost and greater time flexibility. Online collaborative projects teamed US and Armenian schools and brought students and teachers together within a structured environment for cultural and educational

exchange. Teachers had the opportunity to plan and teach together, through virtual partnerships, and students gained exposure to other cultures and mindsets. Virtual collaboration brought the practice of including of diverse ideas; another 'little thing' enabled by Internet technology.

In addition to the virtual exchanges, Project Harmony began to complement traditional physical exchanges with online forums between Armenian and American educators. The blend of F2F and virtual, a key learning from the ICD Programme, was taken to the next level. The additional online time offered greater depth and time for reflection compared to just the standard one or two-day pre-departure orientation. Exchange participants and hosts were virtually introduced to begin building context and relationships and prepare for the exchange. During the exchanges, participants shared their experiences with their colleagues and students 'back home' and for support. Upon return, participants used the online space to apply new approaches, stay in touch with other returnees and reflect more deeply on their experiences.

Moving towards community learning

From the first two years of experiencing the 'big things' of building infrastructure, and the subtler, 'little things', such as layered skills, blending online and offline relationships, confidence and practice, Project Harmony built the context for the final stage of the project: community learning facilitated by educational technology integration for a civil society.

Project Harmony hypothesized that organizing online events to mobilize communities to meet their self-identified needs would support community development, which would, in turn, support national development. Using online interaction processes and technology, the power of shared need and motivation could form a bridge between individuals and small, isolated communities, nurturing a sense of community empowerment. The early ICD experiments showed that introducing the concepts of online group interaction to a diverse set of participants attracted early adopters and stimulated relationships through shared learning opportunities that endured beyond the event. However the focus on new technologies was not the only way in to supporting learning communities. Focusing on community needs and purposes was another.

ASCP had the advantage of having developed strong ties to participant communities in the first two years. Recognizing that these activities had to be community-driven for effectiveness and sustainability, ASCP embarked on community outreach, building on relationships formed during the school connectivity and training phases.

The Regional Field Coordination (RFC) structure within ASCP devised working teams within each region. RFC teams are composed of a Senior Regional Education Coordinator, 1-2 Regional Technical Coordinators, 1 Regional Community Developer, and a variable number of Junior Regional Education Coordinators. RFCs now total over 60 individuals working within their region for their region. The RFC structure ensured that ASCP was tapped into local communities. The RFCs took the lead in developing community initiatives integrating technology towards a common goal with sustainable impact.

Project Harmony focused on having three types of partners in each online learning community event: *early adopters* who offered experience with the technology and tools and who understood how the tools could be effectively used; *motivated learning community members* who gained confidence from the early adopters; and, as needed, *experts/consultants* who brought the topical expertise to be 'learned' and applied within the community of participants.

Each event needed to include four aspects:

- A clear purpose: establishing linkages, ownership and shared understanding around issues of concern.
- Focused action: an outcome of a local action plan.
- Attention to the little things: relationship, conviviality, culture and how we 'talk about online stuff', initiated through F2F orientations.
- A way to bring learning forward: extracting and staying aware of learning and lessons learned.

Meaningful shared issues

Local communities need to determine and prioritize their needs. Project Harmony based its activities on the belief that community learning events are a key to facilitating this entire process. By connecting geographically dispersed learners (or for that matter those with conflicting schedules) through the Internet, the process is strengthened by linking those with common goals. For example, people concerned in one *marz* about childhood health could be more effective and influential if linked to people with the same concern in another *marz*. This reflects research that has shown the usefulness of online health support groups:

> *Talking to other patients can be comforting and reassuring in a way that talking to even the most skilful and communicative physician may not be. Patients share many common experiences and can relate to each other's problems … "they have been there". Empathy is strong amongst those with similar or shared experiences (Ickes, 1997). In addition it is usually possible for patients to get opinions from more people than in local support groups, which enables patients to get a broader understanding of their problems and empowers them to ask more focused questions when next talking to their physician.* (Preece, 1998)

Due to the current economic and social conditions, despite Armenia's small size, there is minimal interaction across the *marzes*. More subtly, in challenging times, sharing of goals and needs across community boundaries builds a sense of being "in it together," offering encouragement and balanced development (e.g. not leaving any region behind).

Project Harmony RFCs identified shared issues between communities and created the linkages across regions. Initial topics were identified for the pilot round of ten Cross Marz Online Community Development Projects. These topics became the driving purpose behind the formation of the learning communities.

Actionable outcomes

For every online community learning event, common understanding was supported both through clear purpose statements for each instance of online interaction, reinforced through question and answer sessions at initial face to face orientations and cemented in actionable outcomes.

An example was the 'Job Market in Armenia' online project. Armenians are concerned with the issues of employment and professional development. It was the priority in three regions and expected to draw participants despite the anticipated hesitance towards technology. In Yerevan, the market is extremely competitive; in Tavush young professionals are isolated from most opportunities; in Shirak the effects of the 1988 earthquake continue to dominate life including employment opportunities. This online event exposed 18 participants from the three regions to current trends in the Armenian job market, highlighted professionalism and provided practical skills such as successful interviewing and resume and cover-letter writing. Those seeking employment learned from the experience of employed participants and together explored common expectations of six participating employers (see the full report at http://projects.ascp.am/community/job/docs/report_eng.doc). It had an actionable outcome of helping participants shape their resumes and launch their job search.

Some issues were new to the country and had to be introduced. Catalysts and early adopters had to be cultivated to share a sense of vision for the purpose and to gain expertise in the supporting technology: activism is triggered by a small group of interested people suggesting and modelling possibility. Online Trainer Anna Martirosyan conducted the first nationwide Online Community Development Project, focusing on community service. Volunteerism has little context in the post-Soviet republics, yet offers a potential engine for change. In the past, 'community service' was basically organized by party officials and was mandatory. However, there are foundations for volunteerism in Armenian culture including a strong sense of responsibility to extended family and neighbours, community strength in the face of distress, and national pride.

More than 15 leaders and active members of international and local NGOs from across Armenia gathered together online to create the first community for discussing community service. As an actionable outcome, they designed and prepared eleven volunteer events in all the regions to begin community service development in Armenia.

Community learning has to be more than online conversations: a conversation must be catalyzed into action and driven with community energy. A youth volunteer corps project exemplified how members co-develop action plans. Project Harmony brought US Peace Corps Volunteers together online with local community leaders to lead youngsters in activities to practice volunteerism. The adults were supposed to teach the youth, but as they taught, they learned from the youth about their needs and the realities of their communities, and sharpened their own skills for motivating others to join in community service activities. The youth's perspectives on their communities and needs influenced the community service activities. They co-developed the plan to generate community interest in the cause.

Extending reach and depth of learning through technology

The medium – technology – also influenced the learning process. What at first seemed less personal eventually was seen as offering greater access to individuals. After the initial online training, the participants implemented offline volunteer activities, and then returned online to reflect on progress, an opportunity that would not have been possible in a limited time F2F setting. The online space enabled sharing of materials, recorded the interactions of both students and teachers (members of this particular community of practice took turns in the roles of students and teachers) and enabled a reflective review.

What was envisioned as a pilot online event has successfully integrated online and offline interaction to equip local communities with the knowledge and support to meet their community needs through ongoing voluntary initiatives. The online component accelerated the results of this focused purpose. It could have happened offline – but online was a more efficient opportunity in an environment where travel is difficult, time consuming and, for local youth, unrealistic. It extended both the reach and the depth of the interaction and allowed for the development of more community context for sustainability.

The little things

When first experimenting with online events to serve local needs, the ASCP staff noticed that many people were unfamiliar with, and even reticent about, the use of technology. They were motivated by the idea of meeting local needs, but there was a 'fear factor' (Romm and Clarke 1995). No one wanted to look incompetent but few had much experience or confidence. For some, the idea was completely foreign. To take advantage of the fantastic motivation that existed around purpose and the desire for tangible action there needed to be a bridge with the technology. There also needed to be relationship-building between people to encourage trust. So the first of the many 'little things' the team discovered were F2F orientations that clarified purpose, process and technique through hands-on demonstration of the technology. In some cases, sub-groups can meet F2F and convene online as part of a larger group, even if the full group cannot meet.

Technical training was critical. Most participants in the community online projects came with zero computer skills, so site staff trained them in basic computer and typing skills at the ASCP classrooms. Hands-on practice, easy initial postings and online games built confidence.

The 'little things' also show up in online and offline group processes which honour the wisdom of local communities, and include social interactions which build relationships and social fabric organically. The local culture places great significance on personal relationships and face-to-face interaction. It is widely accepted that a meeting in person will get one far further than a phone call or written correspondence. As such, there are inherent challenges in the Southern Caucasus' culture of local communities that required special attention. At the F2F orientations, a genuinely warm and caring staff paid great attention to facilitation details. Relationship building was encouraged over orientation and tea.

Introductions among the participants, both offline and online, were always an early priority. The offline interaction enabled everyone involved to associate 'voice' with the posts as well. Pictures of each person attached to each of their online posts made people feel they were interacting with other people, not other computers. Social spaces supported the social fabric, creating trust for the project-oriented online conversations. Such social time, necessary in any work environment (comparable to the water cooler or coffee pot in the morning at the office), provided an outlet as well as bonding opportunity. Participants used the social spaces to share more about themselves and their lives, a lot like the Caucasus tradition of grandfathers gathering around a game of backgammon.

Facilitation skills were cultivated in the staff and encouraged in the communities. Online facilitation requires a slightly different set of skills than offline facilitation, and staff was trained and coached. As they worked with community groups, they modelled and actively coached community members in these skills. Because there is no body language and tone of voice online, attention to how people experience an online interaction can be a defining element of success or failure. Understanding why someone is not participating by calling them, taking the time to restate something in a more neutral tone, or raising questions when there might be confusion are examples of little acts of facilitation that helped groups move forward.

Paying attention to how the staff and leaders talked about online communications and interaction as a tool for community development was another key factor, both from a content and process perspective. Once staff got used to the idea of online interaction, it was easy to forget the experience of a first time user. It was important to avoid jargon and fully explain concepts. Framing the interaction around community needs, not the online environment itself, was significant. The use of local images, stories and context greatly accelerated the participants' interests and sense of ownership. Visuals added depth and context.

Learning how to talk about the projects was not always easy. Staff did practice sessions describing their online event purposes at a training, which developed confidence and clarity. It reinforced the idea that practice is a critical learning activity and worth the time and effort, even in a time-scarce environment.

Bringing learning forward

Finally, learning needs a spotlight. Sometimes we are too close to what we are doing and fail to recognize its value, or we forget to share it more widely with our community, losing some of the potential impact. With the ASCP project, this was particularly relevant. The staff was working long hours and often missed the time for and value of reflection, so the group instituted a process of ongoing reflection through storytelling and the technique known as the After Action Review (AAR) (US Department of the Army, 1993). The Bellanet KM for Development community has a useful guide for this process in the NGO setting.[3] This process, taking place both F2F and online, helped the project staff and participants surface key learning and make iterative improvements.

[3] For a guide to AAR in the NGO sector see http://mail.bellanet.org/kmdir/upload/TearFund_Learn.doc

It was at one of the storytelling sessions that the story of online interaction for community development came full circle, back to the ICD project. Finally, the importance of the ICD learning became visible. The ASCP staff had gathered to start to tell their stories of their online projects. The stories started to flow, most of them related to current work, until it came to the turn of Siranush (Sirik) Vardanyan, who recalled the project's roots with ICD, and with ICD's director, Paul Lawrence. Sirik said: 'I remember what I learned from Paul and I am using it now.' A little thing, perhaps, but profoundly significant, because Sirik has gone on to become a driving practice leader for her learning community and those communities spawning across Armenia. Sirik 'got it' from the ICD project and carried it to ASCP.

Significance and perspectives towards the future

Creating change through community learning is an iterative process, embedded in local, regional, and national context. By blending online interaction tools and practices, Project Harmony has opened up a new set of possibilities to support community learning for local and national development. Through attention to both the larger goals and the little things, Project Harmony is accelerating local change.

Impact on communities

Early gains can be seen through the initial pilot projects. Training and practice have built capacity. People are starting to suggest and run their own projects. Early projects are bearing fruit. From a child health event, children who would not otherwise have been seen by a doctor have been seen and treated. The participating doctors, so happy to connect with other practitioners, have met F2F and have formed an Armenian Pediatric Society.

The volunteer programmes are taking root in schools and communities in areas such as environmental improvement and local culture. Teachers who have gone on exchanges to the USA are staying connected with each other online to deepen their learning and apply them to their daily work.

Connectivity is still an issue: the efforts are reaching a tiny percentage of Armenia's population. But they offer the possibility of uplift – of change driven by local individuals and communities.

Impact on Project Harmony

The work has also impacted Project Harmony as an organization. As a result of these successes, Project Harmony in Armenia has become a 'hot' partner organization. Project Harmony has put the learning and action in the community – in community hands. There is also a growing recognition that Project Harmony can work with diverse communities. With content support from consultants who are topic specialists, they can support more diverse themes. There has been an accumulation of skill and experience. Project Harmony is gaining a solid reputation for doing good, making a concrete difference, and understanding the communities. Project Harmony models the learning itself, surfacing its own lessons along the way... and implementing change where it can.

Potential significance for international community development initiatives

Applying online community interactions allows groups to deepen and extend their interactions and learning. It allows a process for capturing, reflecting on and learning from experience in an iterative manner. Online events can draw on isolated communities and distributed skills and assets from both within and without a community. New ties can encourage groups to achieve challenging goals, knowing they are not alone. Ongoing conversations deepen the ability to talk about things in ways that make sense to community members. This is learning in action.

What comes next?

How are these practices refined and embedded in the community and how can they do some of this without help? Sustainability is always on the agenda. Events are like the early nurturing stage of a garden. First the ground is ploughed, soil is built and seeds are planted. Seedlings are protected till they are strong and then grow on their own. Events are a bridge to community capacity and sustainability. Project Harmony estimates that they will need to continue doing fully supported online events for at least another six months. They will also need to build on current projects so that this is not a one-time experience, but rather becomes a common approach and toolset.

It is essential to focus on building community leadership and ownership to continue the work these online events began. RFCs are working to identify and build this capacity. The early successes have created 'membership'. With continued focus on purpose and action-driven interaction, Project Harmony anticipates that membership will grow into ownership.

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Abstract
This is a story about the things that came together in Armenia, beyond the availability of technology, to bridge time and distance. It is a case history of Project Harmony's Armenia School Connectivity Programme that attempts to highlight the little things and their weaving together to form a fabric of community learning for sustainable civil development. The story affirms the importance of community and organizational context in the success of the project. It identifies some key aspects for catalyzing distributed learning communities for development, including confidence-building through layered training, relationships, attention to how we talk about learning and community needs, and close attention to people before technology.

Although this paper highlights some approaches for areas of low Internet penetration, the process lessons presented here are relevant across a wider variety of settings. And of course, this story pays attention to those little human nuances that support connection – and eventually learning – across a community.

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The multiple balancing act of virtual communities in peace and development

Gerd Junne and Willemijn Verkoren

The devastating conflicts in many developing countries have triggered many NGOs to devote increasing attention to conflict prevention, conflict transformation and post-conflict development. In each of the prominent conflict countries (like Afghanistan, East Timor, Kosovo), several hundred foreign NGOs are active. They come from different corners: humanitarian NGOs, human rights organisations, development institutions, and NGOs specialising in peace building, mediation or reconciliation.

Once in a conflict area, the different organisations have to cooperate with each other. For that, they need to understand each other. They discover that their work overlaps, that they should share information, that their staff needs similar preparation before being sent there, that they can learn from each other and that they can complement each other. They all possess specialised knowledge, which would in fact help others to fulfil their specific tasks if it were shared. Developments organisations realise that they need a clearer grasp of conflict dynamics, and peace and conflict oriented organisations conclude that sustainable peace can only be reached if some economic development takes place.

This situation has given rise to a large number of networks which try to bring together experience from different types of organisation to help each of them to face the challenges of conflict-torn societies.[4] Many of these networks try to create virtual communities to improve the exchange of information and experience and to enhance the cooperation between the members. In many cases, however, this does not immediately help to achieve the aspired results.

Effective maintenance of peace and conflict resolution needs collaboration and communication between all stakeholders. Two initiatives set up in an attempt to do this are the CODEP Network and the FriEnt partnership. A number of problems are common to all virtual communities especially in the initial phase of their existence.[5] The cases of CODEP and FriEnt illustrate many such challenges, and lead us to a ten-point checklist that can be used to assess a community or to build a network.

Case 1: Conflict, Development, and Peace Network (CODEP)

CODEP, the Conflict, Development and Peace network, was founded in the UK in 1993 as a multi-disciplinary forum for academics, organizations and practitioners involved in exploring the causes of conflict and its impact on people's lives. It was

[4] See for instance ReliefWeb (www.reliefweb.int), ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action - www.alnap.org/), Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Network (http://cpr.web.cern.ch/cpr/), CIDA – Canadian Peacebuilding Initiative (www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/peace).

[5] (Collison, C. 2004); (Wenger, E., 2002).

created in the belief that sharing ideas about policy and practice would help members challenge thinking on international responses to conflict and contribute to the development of good practice. CODEP aimed to reduce violent conflict and support those worst affected by it through the improvement of policy and practice in conflict, development and peace work carried out by UK NGOs, academic institutions, consultants and government departments.

CODEP organised regular conferences and roundtable discussion meetings. Next to that, information dissemination was undertaken via the CODEP website. The website contained a database of organisations engaging in conflict, development and peace work. It also contained conference reports, an agenda of events, and a virtual meeting room. In addition, CODEP published regular newsletters, to which a large number of people subscribed.

Members of the network organised in thematic working groups, although it appears that these were not yet fully developed when the network ceased to exist in 2003, mainly due to lack of funding. Some CODEP activities were continued elsewhere: the organization Peace Direct has taken over care of the database of institutions and of the compiling and spreading of the newsletter.

Objectives

From the start, CODEP's objective was an open-ended information exchange which would, as the network developed, help participants synchronise their efforts or undertake cooperative work. However, 'cooperation or coordination never materialized on any major level, indeed competition between agencies and the need to remain independent and distinct in focus were more apparent.'[6]

CODEP's constituency and context changed drastically over the ten years of its existence. The field of conflict studies and peace building grew rapidly, and more organizations began to give thought to the integration of development and conflict policies. CODEP's *Legacy and Learning Report* summarises the developments between 1993 and 2003 as follows:

> *There was a proliferation of NGOs, academics, interested individuals and interested groups for CODEP to link with and these were within themselves increasingly diverse. Conflict focussed programmes and trainings became common, DfID and CHAD were created from the old ODA bringing new funding patterns and spheres of influence. The number, location and nature of conflicts being addressed changed, the relationship between governments and NGOs changed and trends on how to respond to conflict changed (for example where there was once a trend for creating separate conflict departments, there is now a move to mainstream a conflict-sensitive approach across development practice). This context will continue to change and any future networking initiative must be fluid, responsive and challenging in addressing changes.*[7]

[6] (CODEP, 2004)
[7] Ibidem

After 9/11, the context changed further. The discourse, at least in the political domain, became dominated by issues of security. In response, CODEP decided to reorient itself towards a forum for dissent towards the policy of the UK government. Soon after, however, its funds dried up.

The Community

People from a wide range of (mainly UK-based) NGOs and academic institutions participated in the network. These include World Vision, British Agencies Afghanistan Group, Conciliation Resources, Alliances for Africa, International Alert, ActionAid, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Department of Peace Studies (Bradford University), Eritrean Relief Association, Centre for Conflict Management (Norway), Comic Relief, Arab Resource Collective, and the Centre for Defence Studies).

A clear common denominator linked the participants: the desire to develop thinking about conflict, development and peace work. However, there are some signs that the network was too broad and diverse to allow meaningful and innovative exchange. Indeed, CODEP's *Legacy and Learning Report* states, 'diversity in terms of people attending, topics, issues and format was prioritised above focus and uniformity'.[8]

For some participants the group of members was perhaps too large and diverse, inhibiting openness. The report states that although 'agencies within the sectors have continued to value the exchange of information, (they often) preferred to do this in smaller, more confidential forums where they could talk more candidly'.[9]

The network's aim to diversify beyond the UK and include Southern organisations and diaspora representatives was never realised; as such, its innovative capacity, which may have been augmented by adding more varied frames of reference and streams of thought, was perhaps limited by this relative homogeneity. Whilst adding external perspectives might further have worsened the perception that the network was too broad and diverse, internationalisation might have increased the funding opportunities for funding, from sources outside of the UK.

The Content

The CODEP network came together around issues of conflict and development. The combination of these two fields was quite new when CODEP was founded and even today the conflict and development field is still in an early stages of development, both academically and in terms of policy and practice. At the same time the importance of this theme is increasingly recognized, and organizations working in the development and peace building fields are eager to develop their thought, policy and practice. This made the theme an important and suitable one for building a network and annual conferences about Conflict and Development that CODEP organized were generally well attended. The issues raised in CODEP roundtable discussions tended to be 'cutting-edge', addressing important new themes that many organizations struggled with. Like the community itself, however, these issues may have been too broad and diverse, decreasing participants' motivation.

[8] Ibid
[9] Ibidem

Moderation and interactivity
CODEP activities such as events, the publication of reports, and the newsletter were highly moderated. However, the online meeting room on the CODEP website never really functioned. It seems that there were not enough man-hours to invest in making the forum sufficiently attractive for online discussions. For instance, members had difficulties uploading their own documents. They did, however, contribute to the newsletter, which was widely read and appreciated. Even so, CODEP was not very interactive. Conferences were always initiated and organised by the CODEP coordinator and board, not by the members of the network.

Level of interaction
Interaction of the network was relatively low. An annual conference was organized and a number of roundtable meetings were staged, but no follow-up to meetings was organised. However, CODEP members came together in varying groups to prepare meetings and process results. In addition, the executive committee of the network consisted of representatives of various organizations, who otherwise probably would not have interacted as intensively with each other as they did as a result of their committee membership.

Complexity and Depth
CODEP maintains a very straightforward website, but offers many important functions, such as a basic database of organisations, a discussion room, an agenda of events, a newsletter and a number of conference reports. It functions predominantly as a facilitator of *network* exchange rather than *content* exchange. For the visitor who is not planning to directly participate in CODEP conferences, this makes the website less attractive.

Embeddedness
On the one hand, especially in its early years, CODEP provided a unique and important forum to discuss the new issues facing conflict and development communities. On the other hand, the links to the participating institutions appear to have been quite thin, and as such exchanges were set up outside of CODEP when this was more convenient.

CODEP was set up in an early stage of the development of the field, as one of the first networks addressing this topic. Online exchange became available shortly after; and as a result the network was able to drastically improve its communication with members and to expand its base of participants. However, it failed to link up with similar initiatives elsewhere as these started to pop up.

Results
Although the network ultimately crumbled, CODEP was successful as a pioneer in its field, contributing to the development of current thinking about peace, conflict and development. A solid results analysis based on participant interviews is lacking, but network meetings and conferences in particular provided fertile ground for this young discipline to blossom.

Case 2: Working Group on Development and Peace (FriEnt)

FriEnt, the German Working Group on Development and Peace (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Entwicklungspolitische Friedensarbeit), was created in a time when CODEP was reaching its demise. Initiated in the summer of 2001 for an initial period of three years, the partners concluded at the end of this period in 2004 that the partnership should be prolonged, until at least 2007. One of the main tasks of FriEnt is knowledge management: the collection, analysis, and publication of information on research results, project approaches, best practices and lessons learned in the field of development and peace building.

FriEnt is a strong network between a small number of organisations (eight in total; see below). Every organisation has seconded a staff member to the FriEnt Team. This creates a common work force, which can shoulder a considerable amount of work. The main governing body is the Board, in which all organisations have a representative. It meets at least twice a year and decides on the general orientation of FriEnt, appoints the management of the FriEnt team, agrees upon the framework programme and monitors its implementation. Furthermore, there are contact points within the participating organisations, introduced in 2004, to facilitate the exchange of information and the smooth cooperation between the partner organisations.

Objectives
The FriEnt team is expected to offer services to the member organisations and to carry out tasks that any of these organisations alone would not be able to do or which would be a duplication of efforts already taking place (e.g. country analysis in conflict regions). The main objective is to use the resources of the partner organisations in a more efficient manner, by increasing the flow of information among the organisations, creating a 'culture of cooperation' rather than competition and by carrying out common projects.

The objective of the working group is thus not the implementation a single project (or a predefined number of projects), but a continuous cooperation in a relatively broad field. Within this broader field, however, specific themes and projects are defined in annual framework programmes, which provides a focus for the work of the group.

In this way, the network is regularly operationalised and translated into a concrete programme. Since the cooperation agreement is for a limited period of three years, this also adds to the emphasis on specific priorities for any given period.

The community
FriEnt has been formed by an interesting group of organisations. The eight organisations come from different backgrounds: government, political parties, churches, and peace organisations.[10]

[10] The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (www.bmz.de), which also hosts the FriEnt Team. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ, www.gtz.de), a government-owned institution responsible for German bilateral development projects, carrying out about 2.700 projects and programmes in more than 130 countries. Two church-related development organisations: the Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst e.V. (EED, www.eed.de) and the Katholische Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe e.V./Bischöfliches Hiflswerk Misereor e.V. (www.misereor.de). Political foundations: the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES, www.fes.de) and Friedrich Naumann

The group of partner organisations is an 'organised diversity'. It is a closely circumscribed group, but half are umbrella organisations and as such are linked to many other organisations. They have a diverse background, each offering specific comparative advantages. The highly selected membership assures that the group is focused, while at the same time widely rooted in development and conflict-related grassroots work, via churches and the platforms of peace organisations.

Further organisations can be included in the partnership if all founding partners agree. However, an extension of the group is not very probable, because it would upset the carefully constructed balance between the different types of organisations.

The content

FriEnt knows three fields of activity, namely:
- Information and knowledge exchange;
- Networking;
- Competence building and advice (to partner organisations).

For the period 2004-2007, FriEnt focuses on a number of main themes and regions.[11] The main themes include:
- Planning methods, monitoring and evaluation (of development projects);
- Conflict prevention through development cooperation;
- Development cooperation in (Sub-Sahara) countries with religious-cultural conflicts;
- Transitional Justice (in Great Lakes area and Colombia).

FriEnt concentrates mainly on the focus regions of the Middle East, Nepal, Colombia, and Africa.

This is a highly focused programme, compared to the wide range of conflicts and development issues which could be addressed. This does not exclude, however, other relevant issues which can contribute to the debate. For example, the first newsletter reported on a dialogue in peace and development in Nigeria (not organised by FriEnt),

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Stiftung (FNS, www.fnst.de), linked to the social-democratic party and the liberal party respectively. The think tanks of political parties in Germany are government financed (in order to assure research-based policy proposals and to create an informed public debate). They also carry out development projects and have become even more important with the general acknowledgement that good governance, democratisation, an active civil society and a market economy are important for sustainable peace in developing countries. Two platforms of peace organisations: the Konsortium Ziviler Friedensdienst in cooperation with the Sekretariat des Zivilen Friedensdienstes beim Deutschen Entwicklungsdienst www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org, and the Plattform Zivile Konfliktbearbeitung (www.konfliktbearbeitung.net). The Ziviler Friedensdienst (Civil Peace Service) is a voluntary service, supported by women and men with professional and life experience, acting in response to a request from local partners. The latter entertain a close cooperation with the Institut für Entwicklung und Frieden der Universität Duisburg-Essen (www.inef.de), linking the academic community to FriEnt.

[11] The present members of the FriEnt team have special competencies in a number of areas and, on that basis, can for the time being provide an input on specific topics and countries. These include: the relationship between development policy and security policy; conflict economies; the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC); the action plan *Civil crisis prevention, conflict resolution and peace consolidation* initiated by the federal government; and the countries of former Yugoslavia.

and the most recent FriEnt publication on the web is a report on an expert meeting on conflict sensible development cooperation with Pakistan.[12]

Moderation and interactivity
Since the website does not contain any interactive features, there is no need for any moderation.

In its interaction with partner organisations, the FriEnt project team is expected to take a proactive approach. Within the team, the team leader can take all decisions in areas which do not fall explicitly under the responsibility of the Board. That means that there is a hierarchy with a clear allocation of responsibilities, avoiding 'group paralysis' through divergent priorities and approaches. At the same time, the project team is placed at an arm's length from the representatives of the partner organisations: whilst the latter decide on the annual framework, the day-to-day operations are wholly taken care of by the team leadership.

Level of interaction
A continuous interaction is encouraged and maintained among the partner institutions, but this is not visible on the web: interaction takes place directly between the organisations interested in a specific question.

The most visible means of interaction is the quarterly newsletter *FriEnt Impulse*. It has appeared ten times since the first issue was published in September 2002. Because of this fairly low interactivity between partners and limited sharing of information, a constant challenge is keeping network members actively involved and encouraging them to offer up to date information. There is a risk that contact points within partner organisations lose their affinity to FriEnt because of the lack of feedback they receive, and as such neglect their duties as liaison between FriEnt and the organisation in question.

Depository versus interaction
The FriEnt website is nothing more than a depository of information without any interactive features or pretences. It links to member websites, but does not offer a channel to respond to the information provided. The website does not function as an 'exchange', as the information is selected and presented by the FriEnt team: it is a one-way presentation of a limited selection of publications (9 by March 2005).

The information itself which is posted on the website is often the product of intensive interaction. The website discloses the results of discussions, round table conferences, expert meetings, etc., to a larger audience.

Networking is one of the three main fields of activity of FriEnt. The Framework Plan for 2005/2006 identifies country roundtables and thematic inter-institutional working groups as the main instrument to realise this networking objective, and not the Internet; this is reflected in the static nature of the FriEnt website.

[12] http://www.frient.de/downloads/Protokoll_Pak_050119.doc (in German)

Complexity and depth
The website is very straightforward with only a few headings, with more emphasis on quality of content rather than quantity. There are no short news items, only comprehensive documents.

The website gives an impression of some highlights of the common activities; but if the reader is interested in a concrete material question (or in information on peace and development activities in a specific country), the relevant information is rather inaccessible. There is no index, no country- or problem-specific entry point to find this information.

However, one of the partner organisations, the *Plattform Zivile Konfliktbearbeitung*, has a site ('Das Info-Portal') which addresses this need; besides offering information on actual news and upcoming events, it provides access to a broad range of documents which can be accessed by a combination of key words on topics and region. So, if we look at the 'family of websites' offered by the partner institutions, it provides such features. A direct link to the 'Info-Portal' on the FriEnt website would make this more visible.

Embeddedness
FriEnt is related in an indirect way to many organisations in the field. Furthermore, the fact that four of its member organisations are themselves umbrella organisations, further restricts its access to the ultimate beneficiaries in the field. The contact points in the different partner organisations have the task to shorten that distance and facilitate exchange.

Although an English language version of the website is available, beyond that the international embeddedness is limited, and the framework plan for 2005-2006 indicates that increased attention will be paid to exchange in an international context. FriEnt is still very much centred on the German (language) context. However, the newsletter 'FriEnt Impulse' contains much information on international initiatives, most of the links on the website refer to international groups, and members of the FriEnt-Team participate in many international meetings.

Results
FriEnt seems to be a relatively successful network, due to the fact that it was decided to continue the cooperation after the first three years. The exchange of information has been improved, but it has proven difficult to start common projects. The ambition to reduce operational and coordination costs for the member institutions through the investment in the partnership project team still has to be realised.

The multiple balancing act of virtual communities

Organizing a virtual community is a tremendous challenge. The route to success is a narrow, ever bending road. What proved successful for a virtual group at one moment may be unhealthy in its next phase of development. Trying to correct inevitable

errors, one may overreact and get into the opposite kind of problems: *you might as well fall flat on your face as lean over too far backwards*.[13]

The cases of CODEP and FriEnt offer a number of lessons for similar initiatives elsewhere, illustrating that the organisation of a continuous exchange of knowledge and experience is a delicate balancing act between different dimensions.

The work of a virtual community can be highly improved if a balance is struck within the following ten dimensions.[14]

1. The community
One needs a certain critical mass for a lively, sustained interaction. If the group is too small, the chance is great that:
- There will be little exchange, because there are too few people to participate;
- Participants' positions will be quickly known to each other and no longer surprising, so the interest to participate will rapidly decline;
- People with a similar background participate, so that opinions may not differ sufficiently to generate creative ideas;
- Only a small fraction of the potential constituency participates, so that people will turn to other forums where participation is more diverse.

If community is too large, there is a high risk that too many people with different backgrounds join and communication falter. Reasons for this include:
- Individual contributions running beyond the interest of the majority of members;
- People hesitating to engage themselves because they do not see a common denominator which brings participants together;
- An overload of messages generated. A community can drown in its own flow of information, if not skilfully channelled into different subgroups and discussion threads.

There are many other aspects that have to be considered with regard to the profile of people forming a virtual community or network. Does the network intend to bring people together within one country (or within one language area), or does it aim to be a truly international network? A national network has the advantage of a common language being used, and generally a national frame of reference can be taken for granted. On the other hand, the chances for learning are likely to be restricted where examples from other corners of the globe are less often referred to, and the common framework will hardly be questioned since it is shared by everybody: it is more difficult to practice out of the box thinking if you are all in the same box.

2. The content
Not only the community but also the topic of discussion can prove to be too narrow or broad to sustain a network.

If the field of discussion is too narrow,
- It will not likely stimulate a broad enough flow of information;

[13] James Thurber, see http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/588.html
[14] These ten dimensions are based on the analysis of networks, on literature (e.g. Collison, C. 2004) and on the experience with virtual communities of The Network University (TNU, www.netuni.nl).

- The interaction may be less creative since creativity often results from the combination of previously uncombined elements;
- It will only attract the 'usual suspects', and as a result few new links will be made.

If the field is too broad (e.g. 'conditions for peace on earth'),
- The interaction remains too vague and becomes uninteresting for serious people;
- It attracts people with unrealistic ideas, and
- It becomes very difficult to arrive at common elements binding the group together.

Another dimension to take into account in this context is how strictly the field is delineated and who determines this.

3. Moderation
Communities can be 'under-moderated' and 'over-moderated': if everybody can post in the community what he or she wants without quick feedback, irrelevant interaction can become annoying for other members, who are likely to drop out. Unmoderated interaction can lead to less intensive interaction, because nobody stimulates the discussion at critical intervals.

With one or more persons who feel a special responsibility towards the forum, interaction is kept clean and clear, discussions on governance matters can be held where necessary, and reactions can be provoked when they do not come by themselves.

Over-moderation is a risk where a moderator has a narrow view of the purpose of the group, takes decisions in an authoritarian way and stifles discussion rather than stimulating it. There is a thin line between channelling a discussion smoothly into a constructive direction and pressing people into a straightjacket, excluding any spontaneous detours, exchanges or personal remarks.

All in all, a community stands or falls with the quality and level of moderation.

4. Rhythm of interaction
Every group needs a 'rhythm' to organise its own work. If the frequency of meetings and the total amount of information circulated is too high, people will drop out because they do not have enough time to catch up with the discussion and process the information shared.

There is no clear-cut recipe for the frequency of interaction. It depends very much on how central a group is for its members: a group that is highly relevant and supportive for the daily functioning of participants can interact with a high frequency. If the concern is somewhat more peripheral for the members, a slower rhythm would better suit their needs.

If, on the other hand, a group meets infrequently in a face-to-face or virtual setting, there will be little cohesion, little mutual trust, and little sensibility of what worth sharing with the others. The interaction in the group should not overburden the participants, but be sufficiently frequent to keep the interest in the group alive.

5. Objective
Without a specific aim, community interaction quickly becomes spurious. But with a too narrowly defined objective, a community may not survive its own success. It may fall apart once the aim has been realized, without making sure that the accumulated insight is passed on.

Some virtual communities have a very specific objective. They may have been created to prepare a specific event or the next annual report, to elaborate a new strategy, or to coordinate a specific project.

These groups often function very well, because they have a clear focus, their activity is time-bound, and the participants have an obvious common interest. The problem is very often that the knowledge generated during the project is not captured and not passed on to future teams with a similar task. There is also little exchange with other teams that perform similar tasks at the same time. For such an exchange to occur, the community will have to broaden its participant base, but as a consequence, the objective then becomes more diffuse.

To harness the great potential of project-oriented communities, it can be envisaged that a larger community organises itself as a task force which sets itself a series of challenging objectives with a specified time schedule. It can also accommodate different projects, carried out by different subgroups, at the same time.

6. Information depository versus interactivity
A community can be oriented towards archiving documents or towards maintaining a continuous stream of communication.

If the community is a meeting place to exchange impressions and ventilate ideas, there is a risk of losing a collective memory and the exchange of experiences does not result in further developments. There is no concrete ‘output’ from the group, exchange does not lead to ideas that are elaborated and refined. Only if the exchange of information is ‘captured’ in one way or another and made accessible in the future, the facilities or services of the community to its members are sustained.

An increased availability of crucial documents is valuable in itself, but by far too many websites limit themselves to just that. Since the shelf life of many of these documents is normally much shorter than the authors believe, such a depository quickly loses attractiveness. Therefore, if the activity of the community consists only such a digital archive, then it quickly becomes a ‘digital dustbin’, of little use to the community or anyone beyond. Since there is little interaction, there is no access to the *tacit* knowledge available in the community. Such digital archives are only used frequently if they are supported by a lively communication.

7. Memory
Related to the topic of information depository versus interactivity is the *historical dimension* of a site. Are earlier discussions still accessible? Are they well summarized and described so that their results can still bear fruits?

A community that keeps every historical thread of discussion open and does not differentiate between recent contributions and past ones will quickly become

dysfunctional. The 'burden of the past' can become too great if outdated contributions are not cleared away, and as a result, participants will no longer consider the community as a potential source of interesting information.

However, a site which does not allow visitors to trace the roots of a discussion and which concentrates on the present situation only, runs the risk of going in circles. Arguments may be repeated, because few people are aware of similar ones exchanged in the past. Without a collective memory, a sense of identity and purpose may be lost.

The art is not only to archive earlier interaction so that it can be retrieved, but also to use it in a way that stimulates and enriches current debates, reducing the chance that the wheel is invented again and again.

8. Complexity and depth
A community site can be relatively straightforward, or can offer all kinds of additional features. Here, again, the optimum lies somewhere in the middle.

But a site can also be over-sophisticated. If members need a long introduction first to be able to make a good use of the site, then it is obviously overdone. A site can be so complex that the user may not know any longer under which heading, button of title to look for a specific type of information. The website then becomes a kind of maze where people can spend a lot of time without ever finding the information they look for – even if they have read the information on the site before. (The family of websites of *One World* comes close to such a maze.)

Complexity can be due to the structure of the site, but also to the level of the individual contributions. Every community can decide on the level of sophistication and elaborateness that it expects from the contribution of its members and it is up to the moderator to maintain it.

By stimulating short messages, a forum retains the character of a chat group. In such a case members will probably not expect any demanding arguments with comprehensive background information. This makes the threshold for participation low. It increases the flow of messages, but at the cost of less quality and thoughtfulness.

On the other side of the spectrum lies the ambition to put only lengthy and well-elaborated arguments on the site (an example is www.planetagora.org). Such contributions demand much more time from the participants - time to write such contributions as well as time and patience to read them. Although the quality of contributions is probably high, such sites have a fairly high threshold to participate, and the moderators will have to invest significant efforts to convince people to contribute to the site.

An intermediate position might be to assure that there is a large number of extensive, high quality contributions, but that participants can post quick reactions to these contributions, so that the positive aspects of both worlds (elaborate texts and spontaneous reactions) can be combined. Another option is that members post short contributions but there is a link to further work by the contributor or a possibility to contact him/her.

9. Embeddedness

When a new theme pops up in current affairs, we see many institutions starting up a site on such an issue - often without looking to other initiatives to avoid duplication.

Any community should be linked in an appropriate way to a wider environment, to neighbouring communities, similar initiatives in other countries or regions. If this is not the case, a community remains quite isolated. Insights achieved in similar networks might not be taken into account, resources will not be pooled, results cannot be compared, and ideas will remain less widespread.

But one can also err in the other direction. A website can be too well-linked to other sites and other communities, becoming more a portal than a tool for a well circumscribed community. It then becomes a channelling device, making the content of other communities easily accessible, but without adding much value by itself. Such a community becomes a point of departure rather than a terminal for arrival.

In the long run, participants are likely to question the very existence of a network, if its only function is to draw the attention to the work of others. People will increasingly visit the other sites directly, without any detour via the community's own home base. Compare it to the marketplace of a small town: without a link to major cities, it remains a provincial place, perhaps charming, but quickly boring. However, if the market place becomes only a bus station to leave the place into all directions, it loses its own identity and the commuters will quickly move into one of the larger towns around. In fact, this is the risk which a community runs if it is organised around a website only and if no face-to-face activities take place.

10. Results

The possibility of arriving at 'common products' has already been mentioned as a way to capture community knowledge. These might be publications containing lessons learned from the community dialogue, joint projects or programmes, the organisation of an event, or the spin-off of a new community into a different field or region. Aiming for such a specific outcome can make a community more attractive and active, as participants feel they are working towards something concrete that will serve their interest. Being too specific about the intended outcome of the exchange, on the other hand, severely limits the creativeness of the process and the possibility for arriving at unexpected conclusions.

In some cases a common product is far beyond the scope of what a community aims to achieve. Many communities are created for the exchange of knowledge and experience per se. But there is always an implicit assumption that this exchange will lead to better results, if not through joint activity, then through the improved functioning of the individual participants who are enriched by the exchange.

For a participant to be able to 'implement' newly acquired knowledge, a certain learning capacity is required. If the participant is a member of an organisation, then his/her organisation has to be willing and able to change its practice to benefit from the community membership. For this, there needs to be space for continuous reflection on individual and organisational functioning, as well as an openness to change existing policy and structures.

Together, these ten dimensions describe a pathway by which virtual communities can find a way to stay on the right track to becoming and remaining an attractive tool for their members to share knowledge.

Conclusion

The importance of interaction between organisations and individuals around the relatively new field of peace and development has been recognised in many places in recent years. Conflict and peace affect development strategies and outcomes, and the level of development affects the likelihood of (renewed) conflicts emerging. Exactly how these interactions take place, and what this means for the policy and practice of development and peace building organisations are issues that need to be examined further, beyond the scope of this paper. An indispensable part of this is, however, the exchange of experience, information, contacts, and research results between those working in government, academia and research institutes, peace building and development organisations in the North and the South.

Both in Germany and in the UK, an attempt was made to create such an interaction. CODEP in the UK pioneered the field, starting in 1993 when the dynamic interplay between development and conflict only just started gaining recognition and information exchange technologies such as e-mail were little used. It brought a lot of different groups together and made some important contributions to the common development of the thinking about the new field. However, as the field grew radically over the course of the 1990s into the 21st century, CODEP became unable to retain its position as an important forum and exchanges began to take place outside of it, in smaller ad hoc groups to ensure confidentiality and efficiency. This was also a result of CODEP being 'too inclusive' and focusing on too many issues.

FriEnt, on the contrary, very much limited the number of participants and the issues under discussion. Of course, this has disadvantages of its own, as it excludes groups and topics that could contribute or even transform the exchange due to fresh and different insights. A final result of too much limiting could even be that the community renders itself marginal to the thinking and activities taking place in the field. But this does not appear to be the immediate future for FriEnt. The network is still flexible enough to adjust and open to including other issues if this seems useful. Even without new members joining up, FriEnt already links together many more organisations than one would think at first sight due to the fact that half of its members are themselves umbrella organisations.

Both FriEnt and CODEP show that a community functions through more than its virtual (online) aspects. Face-to-face exchanges, reported online for wider consumption, can contribute to the objective of knowledge exchange and development as well. Even so, online exchanges complement this and enable more groups and individuals to contribute and participate, enhancing the dynamics of the community. Neither CODEP nor FriEnt appear to have made optimal use of the virtual tools that are available to them.

The experience of CODEP shows quite simply that the ability to finance a secretariat is important for sustaining networks. In the case of CODEP, the drying up of funds that led to its end may have resulted from (potential) funders' perception that it had not sufficiently adjusted to changing circumstances. Flexibility and sensitivity to changing circumstances is therefore another important condition of success. In the case of CODEP such openness to change should probably have led it to limit and focus its membership and activities more; in the case of FriEnt it may at some point in the future lead it to broaden its scope.

Defining concrete objectives also contributes to the continued (perceived) relevance of a community. In the case of CODEP information sharing and development was the only aim, whereas FriEnt's open-ended cooperation is regularly translated into a concrete programme. Such programmes bring people together around a concrete activity and show the network's practical relevance. Objectives such as the prevention of parallel programming can also increase the practical relevance of the network to its members, funders, and the wider community.

Some important lessons from the analysis of the two networks, then, are summarised by four F's:

- *Focus*, in terms of both content and membership;
- *Flexibility*, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances;
- *Feasibility*, in terms of practical and concrete objectives, and
- *Finding the right balance*, within the ten dimensions dealt with in this article.

Striking a balance in the dimensions presented above, appropriate to the specific needs of a community, can make the difference between success and failure of a knowledge network. Flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances are paramount in a field that grows and changes almost daily.

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Abstract

The devastating conflicts in many developing countries have triggered many NGOs to devote increasing attention to conflict prevention, conflict transformation and post-conflict development. In each of the prominent conflict countries (like Afghanistan, East Timor, Kosovo), several hundred foreign NGOs are active. They come from different corners: humanitarian NGOs, human right organisations, development institutions, and NGOs specialising in peace building, mediation or reconciliation.

Once in a conflict area, different organisations have to cooperate with each other. For that, they need to understand each other. They also discover that their work overlaps, that they should share information, that their staff needs similar preparation before being sent overseas, that they can learn from each other and that they can complement each other. They all possess specialised knowledge that can help others to fulfil their own specific tasks. Development organisations realise that they need a clearer grasp of conflict dynamics, whereas peace and conflict-oriented organisations conclude that sustainable peace can only be reached if economic development takes place.

This situation has given rise to a large number of networks which try to bring together experience from different types of organisation, helping each of them to face the challenges of conflict-torn societies. Many of these networks try to create virtual communities to improve the exchange of information and experience and to enhance the cooperation between the members. In many cases, however, this does not immediately help to achieve the aspired results.

This article describes a number of problems which have to be solved by all virtual communities in the initial phase of their existence, building on two network case studies. These case studies will be discusses in parts one and two of the article. Next, the lessons that can be drawn form their experience are summarised into a list of ten issues that networks have to deal with. These include problems with regard to the people involved, the content of their exchange, the way they work together, and the products that result from their cooperation.

The conclusion sums up a number of lessons that similar initiatives might take into account, if they want to make a long-term contribution to the knowledge exchange between members of their constituencies; flexibility and sensitivity to changing circumstances is an important condition of success. Defining concrete objectives can also contribute to the continued (perceived) relevance of a community. It is also important to have sufficient focus in terms of both content and membership. Finally, finding the right balance in the ten dimensions dealt with in the article can make the difference between success and failure of a knowledge network. In all the dimensions, flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances is identified to be paramount in a field that grows and changes almost daily.

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Knowledge communities and the tsunami response

Experience from the Crisis Prevention and Recovery Community of the UNDP

Gita Swamy

When the Indian Ocean tsunami struck the shores across South and South East Asia and East Africa in December 2004, many lives were lost, livelihoods were destroyed and hard-earned development gains were set back decades. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) country offices and headquarters together with many other local, regional and international organizations responded quickly to the needs caused by the destruction in all affected countries. UNDP quickly deployed its experts for advice and guidance on tsunami related recovery initiatives. Within days, UNDP's internal and global community of practice on 'crisis prevention and recovery' was mobilized to assist affected countries. Over a period of 6 – 8 weeks, this community of practice and others within UNDP were actively and intensely supporting UNDP offices in the tsunami-affected areas through the provision of knowledge advisory services. How did this support unfold and what were the main lessons learned?

Crisis Prevention and Recovery Network: developing a community

In 2001, UNDP created the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, establishing the topic as one of its priority areas to help strengthen UNDP's capacity to respond to crisis and post-conflict situations, as well as contributing to the prevention of their reoccurrence. Emergency response was not necessarily the main priority for this bureau – as there are other UN agencies primarily dealing with this – focusing rather on the link between emergencies and longer-term development.

The Crisis Prevention and Recovery Practice Network (CPRP Net) was established a year later. CPRP Net, a global community of practice, links UNDP staff on crisis prevention and recovery issues. The main purpose of the CPRP Net is to contribute to strengthening capacity at the country level and thus improve UNDP's overall organizational performance. This is done through:

1. Providing opportunities to access new and updated information, lessons learned and best practices related to crisis prevention and recovery;
2. Facilitating exchange of knowledge and experiences at the country, regional, and global levels; and
3. Harmonizing organizational policies and priorities by providing closer linkages between headquarters' thematic units and country offices.

The CPRP Network functions partly like a moderated mailing list: messages sent to the group (cprp-net@groups.undp.org) go first to the network facilitator. This allows the facilitator to ask the sender for clarifications if needed, before sending messages on to the network members.

The mailing list function of the network is supported by regular regional face-to-face meetings of Crisis Prevention and Recovery practitioners, to discuss and further develop latest operational and policy related challenges and approaches. A UNDP Intranet provides easy access to relevant information in the area of Crisis Prevention and Recovery Practice: a one-stop shop capturing knowledge and information, and providing tools such as guidelines, templates, terms of references and information on programme management and funds.

The Crisis Prevention and Recovery Practice Network is part of UNDP's larger practice area on Crisis Prevention and Recovery and is linked to other important activities in this area, such as policy development, community building, knowledge management, advocacy, communication and learning, to name a few.

Since its inception, the CPR community has developed into a lively virtual network that provides a discussion forum for knowledge exchange, support and advice. The network is part of UNDP's knowledge network structure. Developed in 1999, it has since expanded to create knowledge communities for all of UNDP's practice areas and other areas of special concern. Today, the main networks follow a common model: they are moderated by network facilitators and coordinate major initiatives. The referral system is a key activity of all networks, allowing network members to seek and provide structured advice that can be transformed into easy access knowledge products.

The CPRP-network group has steadily grown into a full-fledged community of practice, including more than 1100 colleagues working in UNDP programming countries on issues related to peace building, post conflict reconstruction, disaster management and risk reduction. CPRP Net member participation in the referral system and electronic discussions has doubled in the last year. While the network addresses a broad range of issues, queries and group discussions have been dominated by the topics of natural disasters, post-conflict peace building and integrating disaster risk into the local and national development policies.

In response to the tsunami

Within a few days of the tsunami disaster, the first query was launched on the CPRP-Net and the Information and Communication Technology Network. The Maldives had lost all their lines of communication and needed to identify the best available technology to restore island communication. Within a week more community members working in tsunami-affected countries were requesting advice from the CPRP-Net on such issues as livelihood recovery strategies for Sri Lanka, resettlement schemes for coastal areas in India and post-disaster governance issues in Indonesia, to name just a few. It soon became apparent that while most queries were related to the crisis prevention practice central to the CPRP-Net, they were often strongly linked to

other internal knowledge communities such as democratic governance, poverty eradication, energy and environment, information and communication technology and gender. This required close cross-community cooperation and coordination of queries, advice and preparation of knowledge products. As such, regular tsunami-update e-mails were sent to all members of the network and an internal tsunami website was set up to facilitate access to all relevant information and documents.

As UNDP field offices moved from immediate disaster relief to longer-term recovery a few weeks after the tsunami, the CPR-community, together with all other key practice networks, developed a knowledge advisory approach, whereby the greatest knowledge needs of UNDP offices in tsunami-affected countries were identified and channelled into a virtual discussion. To better serve the cross-thematic nature of knowledge needs, the discussion was divided into three broad topics to be guided by different networks: strengthening livelihoods in post-disaster, linking post-disaster recovery with conflict sensitivity, and fostering participatory approaches.

Key lessons learned

1. *Be prepared!* What is true for all activities in emergency and post-emergency settings is also true for knowledge communities: they need to be prepared. In order to respond effectively to such sudden requests as those that surfaced after the tsunami, it can be useful to anticipate possible scenarios and think these through as part of the community activity. While the CPRP Net was able to respond immediately to requests from colleagues working in tsunami-affected countries, streamlining all related requests and activities across UNDP's communities and networks, whilst at the same time developing a systematic response approach was initially challenging.

   All in all, 'being prepared' does not necessarily mean developing elaborate scenarios for each possible disaster, but thinking through cooperation and collaboration mechanisms that can unfold quickly, building on existing capacities and systems. While rapid reactions and preparedness for such emerging topics are the bread and butter for knowledge communities working solely on emergency response, more general development-oriented knowledge communities might want to reflect on the inclusion of such preparedness aspects so that if called upon, they too can fulfil their role in facilitating access to knowledge.

2. *Cooperate and collaborate across practices.* In the first few days after the tsunami, it became apparent that the scale of the disaster affected not just a few programmes, but whole country operations, especially in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Maldives. The scope of destruction went beyond the limits of Crisis Prevention and Recovery issues, affecting and relating to governance, environment, poverty and ICT-themes. This broad range of issues called for a coordinated approach of all relevant UNDP knowledge communities, rather than an isolated community focus. Cross-community collaboration was the key to a successful and demand-driven provision of knowledge services within UNDP.

3. *Encourage a flexible knowledge community.* In the aftermath of the tsunami, members of UNDP's knowledge communities, varying from on poverty reduction to Information and Communication Technology, used their thematic community as their primary point of reference and guidance. While some of the communities had no prior experience with disaster related recovery issues, there was a need to flexibly adapt to new requests, identify experienced members and work with a number of the communities' external partners, especially with members of the CPRP Net. The result was increased and effective cooperation with other networks on the one hand, and the inclusion of disaster risk and recovery issues into other UNDP networks on the other hand.

4. *Define and limit activities.* In emergency and recovery situations, needs for assistance are numerous and demand a variety of support services. A knowledge community can provide only a certain kind of support for specific areas related to its expertise, leaving other support areas to be covered through other means. Defining beforehand – as part of the preparedness – what kind of support services a knowledge community can offer in such relief and immediate recovery situations can help target its assistance and increase effectiveness.

   UNDP's mechanisms and internal institutions reacted very rapidly to the tsunami and developed quick and systematic responses on how to support UNDP offices on the ground, cooperate with other UN agencies, support needs assessment exercises and mobilize resources. Given the wide range of these activities, the knowledge communities took a few days to define their specific niche to go beyond existing services, yet cater to the emerging demands from tsunami-affected country offices which they were equipped to respond to.

5. *Timing is key.* Post-disaster contexts are rapidly evolving situations that can only be effectively assisted if response is quick and timely. Due to the voluntary and evolving nature of community discussions, it is not necessarily possible to ensure communities adhere to external guidelines and provide their input sufficiently quickly. However, in post-disasters context, this timely delivery is key and opportunities can be lost if timing is off.

6. *Balance the needs of community members.* In the first view weeks after the tsunami, attention, queries and discussion on the network focused on tsunami response. This was a natural reaction to the extent of the destruction and the need for advice; as such, network members strongly supported the needs of their colleagues working on tsunami recovery. However, after a few weeks the community tended towards more balance between the topics at hand and spontaneously emerging needs of the network members. Once this balance was achieved, the relevance of network responses improved, addressing wide-ranging needs of a global community simultaneously dealing with a number of disasters, conflicts and violent crisis, whilst maintaining coherence. In such situations, community moderation becomes critically important: while suddenly emerging topics such as tsunami response should evidently be given priority, this has to be carefully balanced with other topics that are of no less urgency for other network members, but, at such a time, perhaps less visible on the global agenda.

Conclusions

The tsunami response demonstrated the strength of UNDP's knowledge network system, in terms of members' willingness to cooperate and coordinate in a time of crisis, whilst maintaining flexibility and adaptability to changing needs. However, it also uncovered room for improvement within knowledge communities, especially insofar as they were ready and equipped to respond effectively. All in all, the critical success factor for knowledge communities in disaster response turned out to be their ability to quickly mobilize members for ad-hoc and rapid action and adapt a niche approach effectively complementing other on-going activities.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are personal views of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the UNDP.

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Are online communities delivering? The case of C3NET

Hebron A. Mwakalinga

Defining ICTs

ICT stands for *information and communication technology*; from the wording, any medium that handles information fits in the domain of technology-supported information exchange. However, in the context of this paper the definition is restricted to electronic information with computer technology at the epicentre, i.e. the computer and peripherals, the Internet and mobile phones.

The worldwide reach of the Internet

There is an old saying that two things are certain: tax and death; but nowadays we might include in this saying tax, death and the Internet. The number of people using the Internet worldwide is increasing exponentially: between 2000 and 2004 the growth rate is estimated at 125%. It is now estimated that 812 million people have access to the Internet, which is 12.7% of the total world population. Increase in connectivity laterally has been coupled with a corresponding increase in uses and information handled.[15] These developments have also witnessed the fall in the acquisition and operating costs for both Internet services and hardware.

Table No. 1 Internet Access Worldwide

WORLD INTERNET USAGE AND POPULATION STATISTICS						
World Regions	**Population (2004 Est.)**	**Population % of World**	**Internet Usage, Latest Data**	**Usage Growth 2000-2004**	**Penetration (% Population)**	**World Users %**
Africa	893,197,200	14.00%	12,937,100	186.60%	1.40%	1.60%
Asia	3,607,499,800	56.50%	257,898,314	125.60%	7.10%	31.70%
Europe	730,894,078	11.40%	230,886,424	124.00%	31.60%	28.40%
Middle East	258,993,600	4.10%	17,325,900	227.80%	6.70%	2.10%
North America	325,246,100	5.10%	222,165,659	105.50%	68.30%	27.30%
Latin America/Caribbean	541,775,800	8.50%	55,930,974	209.50%	10.30%	6.90%
Oceania / Australia	32,540,909	0.50%	15,787,221	107.20%	48.50%	1.90%
WORLD TOTAL	**6,390,147,487**	**100.00%**	**812,931,592**	**125.20%**	**12.70%**	**100.00%**

Source: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats2.htm

One phenomenon that has been of growing concern among development experts has been the digital divide between poor countries and rich countries. ICTs are an acknowledged vital input into development processes, and ample cases illustrate how the use of ICTs can help achieve more effective results. The use of ICTs in enhancing

[15] Loosely defined to include data.

access to market information, to knowledge on more effective crop production methods and to educational content are just a few well-known illustrations.[16]

As functionalities of the Internet grow, discussion groups have emerged as valuable platforms for people with a common agenda to share knowledge. Discussion groups or online forums are either online or offline. Online forums are web-based, in which case a member participates by opening the respective web page and contributing to a thread. Off-line forums are dependent on e-mail. Community Content Creation Network (C3NET) is the former type of network but in fact works predominantly as if it were the latter. One can presume that this is due to the fact that the majority of its members are based in developing countries, where email is generally easier to access than the Internet.[17]

Background of C3NET

Following the South-South Exchange Travelling Workshop in the state of Pondicherry India in 2002, participants from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America, were inspired by what they saw on how ICTs are being embedded in rural development processes.[18] They realised that they needed to extend the exchange process beyond the travelling workshop and hence initiated a mailing list on which they could continue thematic discussions on ICTs as a tool for development, particularly in rural communities. A number of themes emerged on everyday issues they encountered in their work, including gender empowerment, sustainability of ICT initiatives in rural settings, integration of ICTs in development programmes, etc. This resulted in C3NET, hosted on the development exchange platform Dgroups.[19] The community quickly expanded, joining a wide variety of development practitioners and resource people from around the globe. To date it includes 200 livelihood practitioners most of whom live and work in developing countries. Furthermore, the community provides its members with an appropriate platform to express priorities in terms of future development initiatives.

Discussion Themes

Initially, the forum moderators thought that there was a need to serialize topics for discussion based on past online and offline exchanges; however it turned out that the forum tends to find its own equilibrium and that homogeneity is more conspicuous on a higher level. As such, there is a tendency for spontaneous, short-lived sub-communities emerging and atrophying around on particular theme. C3NET over the period of its existence has discussed a number of subjects, including the following:

[16] Bridges.org, for instance, has done a series of case studies illustrating this point. See www.bridges.org for more.
[17] See www.dgroups.org/groups/c3net
[18] *From Beedies to CDs*, IICD Research Brief January 2003
[19] Dgroups (Development through Dialogue) is an online exchange platform and was specifically designed to facilitate development discussions. Designed and supported by a global partnership of development institutes including Bellanet, OneWorld International, Hivos and others, Dgroups is free of use for development practitioners in developing countries. For more, see www.dgroups.org.

Language barriers and ICT-solutions

Analysts in ICT development view language as one of the barriers limiting access to Internet by rural communities. Whilst the Internet is dominated by the English language, the barrier is narrowing, as one example during the discussion cited the entry of a Kiswahili interface on Google search engine. [20] Arguments were made as to whether the world should struggle to be multi- or mono-lingual. In this context, ICTs can be viewed as a double-edged sword: while they contribute to the decimation of minority languages, they can also be used to protect the very same. Two strands of efforts are noted in particular: Information technology looking for a space in local communities and the converse, communities looking for space in the digital world. Open source software is a possible entry into virtual space by less-mainstream languages, as interfaces can be adapted and thus translated to meet local needs.

Internet-enabled mobile phones

Recent statistics show that mobile phones have permeated rural communities at an unanticipated rate, providing opportunities for the poor to get integrated in the e-World. Current communication capabilities of mobile phones are no longer limited to voice, and SMS (standard messaging system), Internet browsing, video and photography are all part of the new realm of possibilities via mobile phones. Forum members shared information on and experiences with Wireless Access Protocol (WAP) as a tool to connect millions of people to the Internet. Reference was made to the successful Manobi Project in Senegal where WAP has been deployed as a tool for farmer information services.[21] A major limitation with this technology however is that in order for one to access the Internet by WAP, mobile telephone companies have to provide WAP-compliant services and Internet web pages need to be reformatted into this protocol, neither of which are common.

Closing the gap through community radio

One of the subjects that continues to draw the interest of many members is community radio. This seems to be a popular tool for reaching people in poor, rural areas where access to technology is severely restricted. In this context, the combination of radio and Internet, for example, can provide a solution. Members shared their experiences and knowledge on different technologies, approaches and uses of community radio for development purposes, on policy matters and investment costs, and shared evaluation outcomes on community radio projects worldwide.

> *"We are very pleased to inform you that our NGO is now using radio as a tool in rural areas of upper-nkam division in Cameroon, Central Africa. The project was funded by GKP and we will be very pleased to share the achievements and the problems encountered with you."*
> Sylvie Siyam, Protégé QV, Cameroon

Lack of infrastructure in rural areas

This discussion involved two threads. First, the issue of *powering rural ICTs*: where infrastructure is scare or lacking altogether, the diffusion on ICTs in needy areas is severely restricted. Finding alternative sources to grid electricity and sustainable sources of energy for rural ICT-projects is a major challenge. Nonetheless, solutions include solar energy and bio-gas, which were shared in the community based on the cases of refugee camps in Western Tanzania and a school in South Africa.

[20] Swahili is the most widely spoken African language, with more than 50 million speakers in East Africa and Central Africa, particularly in Tanzania (including Zanzibar) and Kenya. For more, see www.yale.edu/swahili.
[21] For more, see http://www.manobi.net/wsa2003

Second, the issue of *rural connectivity* – or lack thereof. One the major challenges that lead to sub-optimal participation by potential stakeholders in development, is their lack of connectivity due to financial restrictions, lack of connectivity – i.e. access to any Internet services, and lack of technological capacity. The forum explored various alternative connectivity options for rural areas including VSAT and Internet mobile access point (IMAP), and explored different funding requirements and opportunities. It appeared that huge differences in costs exist within the African continent, even between neighbour countries Tanzania and Uganda, without clear reasons why this is the case.

Planning and sustainability of information centres

A recurring and popular topic continues to be the sustainability of ICTs for development in general, and of telecentres in particular. While the bottom line has been information and knowledge management and exchange, technology and scale matters, and many initiatives have ended up as telecentres, focusing primarily on access, instead of information centers/kiosk, focusing on relevant content. This is a serious pitfall in terms of the sustainability of initiatives. Members highlighted that sustainability encompasses social, economical, technical and financial facets, and that critical success factors for telecentres/information centres include private-public-partnerships (PPP) and gender inclusion. The community observed that at present there is no single model for a successful telecentre that could be applied worldwide, as the viability is situational and location-specific.

Open source as a viable alternative for development

Of late, the acquisition cost of computer hardware has been going down, but the cost of application software remains prohibitive for most users in poor countries. Luckily there is a worldwide movement to develop alternative applications and operating systems. The forum exchanged information surrounding open source software, including operating systems, office applications and programming tools. Members shared knowledge on various applications including office suites, graphics, project management tools, web content management and others. All in all, the community sends out a clear signal that there is a lot of interest and scope for this type of non-proprietary software in the development context.

Volunteerism and local ownership

One of the success factors for a rural telecentre is local ownership and demand-responsiveness. In some countries, notably India, volunteerism particularly by women has been found to work effectively in managing the centres. Volunteerism is less practised in other countries and as a result it is difficult to get dedicated/committed service from volunteers. Members shared their experiences and agreed that the phenomenon of managing rural ICTs through volunteers has to consider socio-cultural values. For instance, in certain countries there is less ‘sense of community’, which restricts peoples’ willingness to commit to their community ‘for free’. However, a positive example of the effect of volunteerism was cited based on one village’s experience in involving women as volunteers in the local telecentre. Thanks to their activities in telecentres, their ‘action-radius’ increased and they were suddenly responsible for activities beyond the walls of the household. This enhanced the women-volunteers’ self-esteem, and improved the gender-awareness in several villages.

Other interesting threads included the mitigation of the spread of HIV/AIDS, intellectual property rights, inclusive ICT-policies, content with market value, action learning, open access, etc., all related to the use of ICTs for development purposes.

First HIV/Aids Comic CD ROM Launched: the CD in comic form titled 'AIDS The Ultimate Killer' tells the story of two friends who discover the deadly effects of HIV/AIDS and decide to tell others about it. Their story is told, using friendly images that appeal to the young audience for whom it is intended.
Ahiabenu, Kwami II, Ghana

Success factors for online forums

A comparison between C3NET and the Tanzanian www.e-thinktank.tz and www.swopnet.org shows that national forums are on the whole more dynamic than the international community of C3NET. This could lead one to believe that the more people interact face-to-face, the higher the level of online community activity. This is supported by the sudden burst of activity experienced after or just before a community workshop. Other success factors include:

Openness
Where the context of topics is common to all participants, discussion is more localised and thus more relevant to participants. They know they are in a 'safe' environment, and can thus freely express experiences and ways by which to tackle these. Both in national and international forums, it is evident that where a stated common interest is discussed, people will feel less inhibited to discuss openly about it, as they know that other community participants can relate to what they are sharing. Consequently, a national forum has a larger degree of openness than a internationally diverse one like C3NET.

Vent for opinion making
Historically, Tanzania is a country with limited freedom of press, experienced even by this very generation. National forums active in the country such as the ones mentioned above have provided a vent for public opinion making. People can discuss subject matters online, which would be difficult with other, more traditional and less anonymous media such as radio or newspapers.

Access to the Internet
Member profiles of the groups discussed here indicate that, whilst they have a significant rural interest, they are based mostly in urban areas. In other words, these members have access to Internet on almost 24/7 basis, many from their office environment; therefore, cost, access and skills are generally not restrictive factors for participants of these forums.[22]

C3NET, beyond the e –
One of the greatest indicators that befit the word 'community' in the name C3NET is demonstrated by the manner in which the community shares not only knowledge and information, but also support, sympathy and even resources. For instance, many of the

[22] Internet access in Tanzania costs about $ 0.5 per hour in large cities and as high as $2 in smaller towns.

C3NET members learnt about the Tsunami disaster through the posting on the forum by a member based in India. Many members voice their response to what they saw on TV, and condolences, financial and material pledges were made using the platform. This illustrates one of the key success factors of this community, namely the strong factor of *trust* between members.

> Mr Arunagiri, a participant of the South-South Exchange Workshop (from Malaysia) came forward to help reconstruct one village following the tsunami disaster. The project manager responded on the community: "We are indeed grateful to OWSA staff for this timely help, for rehabilitation work in the information villages of Pondicherry."
>
> Subbiah Arunachalam, MSSRF, India

It has been demonstrated on numerous occasions that community members generally feel comfortable and secure within this forum, which enhances the willingness to share experiences, pose questions and learn from each other. It can comfortably be stated that the combination of people working in similar contexts and situations, in a friendly, moderated environment, with face-to-face meeting opportunities presented every year, contribute to the strong feeling of trust between C3NET members. This can definitely be considered to be one of the key successes in the community's two-year existence.

How Useful Are Online Forums?

An evaluation report cited on the Internet sums up the usefulness of online discussions as follows:

> *…On the whole, the use of online discussions has been highly successful and participants believe that such discussions can be a viable alternative to face-to-face discussion groups. …The scope of materials employed in online discussions (is) noticeably greater compared with the variety generally turned to in face-to-face discussions. …When asked to compare the quality of online discussions with that in face-to-face discussions, students generally rated the quality of online discussions as better. Convenience and flexibility were among the key reasons for favouring online discussions.* [23]

It is difficult to get standard indicators rating the effectiveness of online forums. However, it suffices in the scope of this paper to mention two implicit denominators for evaluating online forums. First: the quantitative trend of members listed and second, the continuity of discussions threads.

C3NET has grown in size from less than 30 members in January 2003 to 200 in just over two years, from various parts of globe, both North and South (notwithstanding its mission to facilitate exchange of information among members from countries in the South).

In January and February 2005, members of C3NET responded to three short questions: -

- How has C3NET helped you?

[23] For more, see http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue3/anderson.html

- What do you like about C3NET?
- What don't you like about C3NET?

A selection of member responses (sic.):

How Has C3NET Helped You?	**What Do You Like?**	**What Don't You Like?**
Sharing experience and knowledge on different ICT4D activities.	The focus on rural areas.	C3NET is not widely promoted to bring more people from the field.
By providing information.	Information sharing.	Not applicable (n/a)
Very much.	Collaboration.	People not responding.
The information sharing has made me to design some of the most sophisticated designs in communication to be the back bone of the country.	The day to day latest information in the respective fields.	(n/a)
Sharing information, announcing events, creating contacts.	Even being a virtual community, you know physically the people you were together at the South-South Exchange Workshop.	It looks like we never finish to address a topic and sort out any conclusions.
To network with people.	Its simplicity.	Its limited members' interaction.
Provides valuable ICT4D information.	Access to information.	(n/a)
Better use of ICT through radio broadcasting programs to reach rural women, exchange of information, announcement of events.	Manner of sharing experience with others on how to fight poverty in the communities, the friendly atmosphere and conviviality in the exchange.	C3NET language is only English, what about others languages.
Sharing information and knowledge with other professionals on line to widen my understanding as well as act as a bridge to transfer it to the community where I am working, to enhance development.	Sharing of information and knowledge.	Not many people are connected to the Internet, therefore many are still locked out.
I have been able to use the tool of research to print and provide internet information to members of my organisation.	Every bit of information	None so far
We have been able to learn and borrow good practises on how different ICTs are being applied in the generation and sharing of knowledge and information.	Diversity of participants and views expressed in the forum.	Too much information which sometimes do not get enough focus due to time.
I have been able to interact with different people in the group, got to useful information and also got to exchange views with others.	I find peoples' opinions about a particular topic. When there is something one is not sure about, they just throw it in the group up for discussion.	None so far.
Getting more awareness in the global ICT Developments.	The fact that it includes people from many different aspects of ICT.	I feel there is less sharing on individual project developments among the members.

Source: C3NET, Applications for the Information Management and Knowledge Sharing Workshop, Kampala, April 2005.

Challenges Facing Online Forums

Inconclusive Threads
Two divergent aspects arise here: one is that the forum operates on a principal of freedom of expression and hence people are free to post what they think is burning at that specific moment or they perceive it to be of value to other members. However on the other hand, too much of anything is detrimental and in this regard threads that are inconclusive, truncated and most importantly perhaps undocumented are dampening the output of the forum.

ICTs: Technological Convergence but Philosophically Divergent
Convergence of communication tools is changing the operating terrain significantly. It is common that electronic forums have surpassed the conventional channels when it comes to access of content by the general public. As a result, the general public in developing countries no longer constitutes a body of opinion where access to ICT is limited. Furthermore, few traditional communication media source knowledge from such (online) discussions, therefore restricting the reach of online discussed topics and even excluding the general public. This reaffirms the barrier between those with means to share in information and those without.

Trade-Off Between Freedom of Participation and Focus
There is a trade-off between freedom of participation and focus in a discussion thread, and there is a need to strike a balance between the two. Some forums are highly specific down to the discipline, delve into one very specialised subject, or have a particular defined goal, and whilst these forums generally have relatively small membership, they can maintain focused discussion threads. Where freedom to participate is less restricted, topics can dilute the focus of the forum and as a result the quality of discussion can diminish. Especially in such forums, and C3NET is of this type, it is a particular challenge for moderators to ensure an adequate balance is maintained, and important threads are pursued, followed-up and summarised.

Low Internet Penetration Rate
In Tanzania, for example, access to the Internet is estimated at 0.7%, whereas the average for Africa is 1.4% (the figure though is inflated by few smaller countries that have more than 10% penetration rate, e.g. Seychelles, Re-Union, and Mauritius), versus the world average of 14%. This low penetration rate is characteristic of many developing countries, where C3NET draws most of its members. This was also mentioned during the abovementioned member survey to be the main cause for some members, who are quite active during face-to-face exchanges, to disappear off the radar as soon as their airplanes carrying them back home takes off.

Lack of Feedback
Most forums are one-way traffic in terms of how the forum helps the user, and if there is any feedback, the resulting output lacks visibility. A quick search on the Internet revealed that there are very few documented evaluations on the effectiveness of online forums. This can be attributed to the fact that recently forums are part and parcel of the Internet service by default and making an evaluation of such an all-encompassing domain seems a waste of time.

The Way Forward for C3NET

The success of the C3NET community is attributed to the common context in which members work and thus their mutual understanding of information needs; to the strong element of trust, built between members not only virtually but also through face-to-face exchanges; and by maintaining a delicate balance between openness and persistence in terms of guiding discussion threads. Whilst the latter does offer room for improvement, the international diversity of the community demands more flexibility in terms of determining the discussion context.

However, it is the challenges that one needs to look at in proposing the way forward and these are of two categories: those within the reach of C3NET and those beyond.

First, in order to blow more life into the forum, it is proposed that moderation is widened; currently two people are moderating C3NET, namely from Tanzania and Uganda. If more moderators could be added from other parts of the world, ICT-developments going on in their respective regions could be captured more effectively, for instance from the Indian sub-continent, Asia, Latin America, etc.

Second, networking with other forums has been quite productive because in a number of cases there are themes that are crosscutting in nature. As such, C3NET has benefited from other forums especially the Open Knowledge Network.[24] Members need to be encouraged to inform local ICT networks in their respective countries to subscribe to the community as and when opportunities arise.

In conclusion, online forums can be a very useful complimentary source of knowledge. Many C3NET members concur that the community has helped them to improve their knowledge of ICTs, and has supported them in their development work. As the community grows and ICTs are increasingly maintained into other policy domains, it will be a challenge to ensure that the focus and momentum of the community are maintained.

Abstract
Knowledge management and sharing is an important input to development processes; however, in most developing countries access to knowledge resources is limited. The ubiquity of ICTs has opened the possibilities for better management and sharing of knowledge at institutional, community or individual level, while horizontally it has led to increased affinity between, and higher rate of diffusion amongst institutions, communities or individuals. On the other hand, there is a wide gap between rich and poor countries and between urban and rural settings, which calls for concerted efforts to improve access to ICTs for the disadvantaged rural communities.

Internet-based (online) forums are one of many forms of knowledge exchange that have been greatly enhanced by accessibility to ICTs. Built on the spirit of South-South knowledge exchange workshops, Community Content Creation Network

[24] Open Knowledge Network (OKN) is a community hosted by OneWorld International, supporting the development and exchange of local content using ICTs. For more, see www.openknowledge.net.

(C3NET) is one of such forum; it focuses on using ICTs to positively influence the development of rural livelihoods.

This paper takes inventory of the successes and challenges of C3NET as a means to exchange knowledge among its members. To a limited extent reference is made to research findings elsewhere and other forums.

While the author is a moderator of C3NET, the contents herein do not necessarily reflect the understanding and position of the community.

About the Author

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Virtual knowledge communities: lessons learned in making them work

Anne Hardon

Why an online community?

In the development sector, knowledge sharing and social learning are fundamental to how practices are improved.[25] This sharing and learning often takes place in informal and formal networks. Since the explosive growth in the use of ICTs, much of this networking is taking place through the medium of online networks, facilitated by groupware. At the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), such communities are called virtual knowledge communities (VKCs). KIT recognises these communities and networks as being critical to development, because they have the potential to:

- Serve as an ongoing learning venue for practitioners who share similar goals, interests, problems, and approaches;
- Provide rapid responses to individual inquiries from members;
- Develop, capture, and transfer best practices on specific topics, by stimulating the active sharing of knowledge;
- Influence development outcomes by promoting greater and better-informed dialogue between stakeholders;
- Link a diverse group of practitioners from different disciplines;
- Promote innovative approaches to address specific development challenges.

At the end of 2004, KIT Information and Library Services (KIT ILS) started with three VKCs.[26] After 20 weeks of operation, the VKCs were evaluated and decisions were made about future plans.

The evaluation was carried out with the statistical findings to determine the usability (with a focus on how well the user interface supports human-computer interactions). This does not say anything though about the motivation to participate, nor the 'satisfaction' of the user. Therefore, ethnographical methods were used, such as online and personal interviews with members, to learn more about the sociability of the communities (i.e. the 'reason for' and 'result of' the interaction between members).

The development of the platform, interest areas and objectives

Recent developments within KIT ILS are founded on the principle that information is of crucial importance to the development of knowledge in a fast changing society, and

[25] (Cummings 2003)
[26] KIT Information and Library Services (KIT ILS) is a department of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) situated in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. KIT ILS houses one of the largest libraries in Europe on themes in the international development debate.

that new ICTs are able to facilitate and stimulate information exchange.[27] As such, core competencies of KIT ILS comprise the provision of access to information for development purposes, using a variety of media such as printed materials and online information. On the basis of these competencies, professional advice is provided for information service providers, aimed at strengthening their capacity, particularly in developing countries.

Consequently, KIT ILS decided in June 2003 to start three VKCs with the general objective to provide professionals in developing countries with information to better carry out their work, on the following themes:

1) Gender, Society and Development;
2) Sexual Health;
3) Information and Library management.

VKCs 1 and 2 were developed to support already existing documentary products: Gender, Society and Development is an annual book series, in cooperation with Oxfam International, and Sexual Health Exchange is a quarterly newsletter, published in cooperation with SAfAids (Zimbabwe). As such, KIT ILS saw these VKCs as possible sources for interesting and relevant articles, case studies and field experiences for the book series and quarterly newsletter respectively.

Seven months were spent on the development of a unique platform for information exchange. Although the Dgroups platform had already been available for some years, KIT ILS decided to design a tailor-made platform in order to provide extra partner services, such as direct access to the KIT database.[28] One unique aspect of the VKCs, negotiated with Reed Elsevier for a pilot period of one year, was members access, free of charge, to the *ScienceDirect* database, which includes 1800 journals, 6 million articles and 60 million abstracts from all fields of science.

Preparation and pitfalls

During the seven-month preparatory phase, the community platform was developed in cooperation with an e-learning consultancy firm. Whilst developing the terms of reference, it became evident that an e-*learning* platform is very different from an e-*sharing* platform - the latter being what the VKCs needed. For example, instant messaging is a proven and popular communication tool for partners in developing countries with limited or difficult access to the Internet, but is not necessarily part of an e-learning tool. Such differences had to be overcome before the envisaged functionality was clear for all parties.

Furthermore, the moderators themselves did most of the determination of functionality, without being in dialogue with the proposed members, whilst the concept of VKCs was new to most of them. In this respect, the VKCs were more supply-driven than demand-responsive.

Finally in June 2004, the objectives for the VKC-pilot were formulated as follows:

[27] (ILS 2003)
[28] Dgroups is an online home for groups and communities interested in international development. It is a platform that has purposely been designed as a simple, easy to use tool; it is non-commercial (no ads), respectful of privacy, and targeted at low bandwidth users in the South.

1) To support professionals in their work:
   a. To stimulate knowledge sharing,
   b. To provide up-to-date information;
2) To stimulate the use of KIT ILS products and services;
3) To experiment with online publishing;
4) To gain experience with this digital form of knowledge sharing.

Monitoring and evaluation: the VKCs in detail.

The VKCs were monitored every two weeks, following the website statistics (number of members, actions by individual members, admissions made by members, etc.) and where needed, actions were taken accordingly (extra e-alerts, individual e-mail responses, etc.).

The evaluation was based on the user statistics of the past weeks, on an online survey, on personal interviews with some of the members and the observations of the moderators.[29]

VKCs: themes and objectives
Information Management VKC
The *i*Management (information management) virtual knowledge community was started in order to bring KIT ILS's information professionals closer to counterparts in partner institutions in developing countries. The mission of the VKC was:

To provide a forum where members can exchange experiences in the field of information management, and identify issues of common interest. As KIT, we would like to use this forum to build on and intensify our contact with a small number of key partner individuals and institutions, looking at ways in which we can identify common interests and develop joint initiatives in this area.

Participants included information managers and professionals in the field of development information from both the South and the North. The community had 56 members, comprising 40 KIT

Resources posted onto the* i*Management VKC

Providing online information services in Makerere University Library, Walter Omona, Institute of Social Research Library, Makerere University, Uganda

The SIDALC-network on agricultural information in Surinam, Jane W.F. Smith, Anton de Kom Library, University of Surinam

Virtual library project of KIT ILS, Tilly Minnée, KIT ILS

Test results KIT Web OPC, Rosemay Ng Kee Kwong, Sugar Industry Research Institute, Mauritius

Challenges of PBL libraries in Mozambique: mission report 2003, Henk van Dam, KIT ILS

Knowledge mapping: a module for the training course IKM Training, Deependra Tandukar, Internation Centre for Mountain Development, Nepal

Information networking for Ghana's agricultural research and development, Joel Sam, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research

Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute Library: a short description of library activities Sugar Industry Research Institute, Mauritius

HIV/AIDS prevention by information strategies in Francophone Countries, Modou Fall Sall, Information and Documentation Centre, African

counterparts and 16 staff members of KIT ILS. For the evaluation, members' opinions were collected using an online survey (n=18) and four telephone interviews. The virtual workspace included a monitoring tool.

> *Thank you so much for informing me of the important initiative you are undertaking to create a forum where we can exchange our experiences and identify issues of common interest in the field of information management. I surely would love to be part of that important initiative and look forward to participating actively.*
> Walter Omona, Makerere University, Uganda

Gender, Society and Development VKC
The objectives of the community Gender, Society & Development (GSD) were:

To contribute to the development of information on women's and gender issues; to stimulate online discussion on information needs in this field; to produce, in cooperation with the members, new information resources, varying from paper and electronic literature lists to thematic publications.

> I am a moderator of a Gender group as well (only discussion group). I am very interested and enthusiastic about the GSD VKC. There are many interesting resources. I apologize for the lack of input I have provided. Because I am doing research on Gender & Water, there was not a particular reason to mix in the discussion.
>
> *Sara Ahmed, India*

62 people were invited to join this community; 38 persons participated. Of these, 18 were authors/editors of earlier editions of the GSD book series. Other members were experts in the field of gender and development, both from the north and south. For the evaluation, members' opinions were collected using an online survey (n=11) and two telephone interviews. Monitoring statistics were generated by the virtual workspace.

Sexual Health Exchange VKC
The objectives of the Sexual Health Exchange (S/HE)virtual knowledge community were:

To provide a forum where readers of Sexual Health Exchange (newsletter) and others can share their experiences with HIV prevention programming and research, giving other people access to their good practices and results.

> Unfortunately, I did not have time to post a message or comment. But I was happy with the information I found at the Documents and I downloaded 4 papers.
>
> *I have a good internet connection. This is the case for most NGOs in the big cities. In rural areas there is hardly any internet. I will use the VKC more actively in the future and contact other members about their experiences.*
> Richard Mutakyawa, reproductive health officer, Tanzanian NGO.

The main objective is allowing others to learn from their successes and failures, and share insights and lessons learned. Relevant resources collected by the well-stocked library of KIT (Royal Tropical Institute) in the Netherlands will also be made available to members. An additional aim is to improve the content and quality of the (newsletter) by making it more interactive and consultative.

Readers/members are explicitly asked for their opinions and input on current and forthcoming issues of Sexual Health Exchange. This input could consist of advice on what themes and sub themes could be addressed, suggestions for appropriate authors and relevant programme descriptions, and the submission of articles."

More than 130 persons were invited to join the community, of whom 42 participated. The members were selected from the subscription database of the S/HE newsletter. We identified people with online connection possibilities, working with NGOs and grassroots organisations, who could provide useful contributions and field experiences for the S/HE newsletter.

For the evaluation, members' opinions were collected using an online survey (n=17) and two telephone interviews. Statistics were generated by the virtual workspace.

The four objectives and their results

Objective	**Indicators**	**IM**	**GSD**	**S/HE**
1) Providing information professionals in developing countries with information to better carry out their work, stimulate knowledge sharing and provide up-to-date information.	Online Survey (OS): How many respondents indicate they have used information for their work?	13 of 18	8 of 11	15 of 17
	Statistics (Stat): How many messages and information resources were uploaded in comparison with the expected numbers?	Members: 80 instead of 40 Moderators: 147 instead of 80	Members: 30 instead of 40 Moderators: 47 instead of 80	Members: 11 instead of 60 Moderators: 124 instead of 80
2) Introducing the members to different KIT ILS products and services	OS: No. of respondents indicating the use of KIT ILS services i.e. ScienceDirect (SD) or KIT Library Catalogue (LC).	13 (of 18 resp.) found SD very useful. 9 found LC very useful.	3 (of 11 resp.) found SD very useful. 4 found LC very useful.	8 (of 17 resp.) found SD very useful. 11 found LC very useful.
	Stat: No. of visits to ScienceDirect (SD) and Library Catalogue (LC) via VKC	SD: 30 LC: 43	SD: 3 LC: 8	SD: 6 LC: 23
3: Producing an 'output' with the members of the community (online based publishing)*		The iM VKC did not have an existing product yet, as the other VKCs, but was interested to produce a new output such as a special issue of a magazine, a conference or	Expected output: 5 papers for book. Reality: 0 papers for book. Expected: substantial input for discussion on next years theme. Reality: two	Expected output: 5 suggestions for articles. Reality: 0 suggestion for articles. Expected: substantial input for discussion on

		seminar. Further discussion within the community on this topic is planned for 2005.	reactions.	theme SHE nr. 1 Reality: two reactions.
4: Gaining experience with online communities and understand wishes/needs of the members	OS: A) Which section of this VKC do you find most useful? B)What kind of information would you like to see in an online community?	A) Experiences' and ScienceDirect (n=13). B) Lessons learned/good practices (n=15) and discussion on topics and online resources (both n=14).	A) Messages (n=9) B) Online information resources (n=10), followed by lessons learned/good practices (n=9).	A) Documents (n=14) B) Printed information resources (n=14)

* KIT ILS thought that the possibility for our members to publish their own articles and experiences in an already established GSD book series or S/HE newsletter, would be very attractive. Furthermore, we were interested in the experiment of using the VKC as a generating tool for articles for these publications.

Evaluation findings

It can be concluded that from the three VKCs, *i*M performed overall as the best. Even in the short period of 20 weeks, there was lively discussion and both moderators and members updated their experiences and cases. One of the reasons might be that information specialists in general are used to (online) communication and information exchange. They can easily find their way in and around an online community, have continuous access to online communication and are inclined to share practical experiences.

The GSD VKC did not perform as expected. Both moderators and members added less information than expected. Two reasons might have played a role. First, the 2005 *Gender Series* book was in an advanced phase of development. Authors had already been asked for submissions and moderators and authors e-mailed outside the VKC. Hence there was no need for the moderators to stress the submission of articles with other community members. Second, the invited community members shared their connection with gender and development, but all had very focuses and research topics within the theme. Thus, there was no clear common ground on which discussions would start.

The S/HE VKC received barely any input from the members, in spite of extensive encouragement by the moderators. One clear conclusion might be that the selected members, almost all working at a grassroots level, hardly had any experience with nor access to online communities. (See also point 2, *Lessons Learned*).

Lessons learned

Although 20 weeks of operation is rather short to find definite reasons for failure or success, a number of factors played a role towards the outcome of the pilot.

1) Thorough preparation and needs assessment is critical

In light of a pilot project, we had decided to introduce a platform with a choice of different information services to support our partners. Furthermore, we had decided after visiting seminars and consulting online information, that the possibility for members to contribute to a printed product would offer them a much sought-after possibility for publication and would motivate them to participate in the discussions. We assumed it would be better to introduce a ready-to-work platform and start consultations with the members about the platform during the pilot period.

After the evaluation, we think however that it might have been better to start discussions with the members in advance, and design the platform and the objectives together with them – even for a pilot project of 20 weeks. The success and thus the continuation of the *i*M VKC, the only VKC where there was a 'needs assessment' in advance, confirms this belief. Before the inception of the VKC in its current form, one of the moderators talked the idea through with other information specialist from the north and the south. This led to a common understanding of what the community should more or less look like, what kind of information the partners would like to have and who would like to join. It is thanks to this prior knowledge that the *i*M VKC has been able to respond more effectively to member demand than the other two.

2) Familiarity with online networking catalyses exchange
Familiarity with the phenomenon of online communities and online information resources does play an important role in the success of a community. The persons invited to the *i*M VKC all work in information and relatively resource rich environments. Most of the members are familiar with the use of ICTs and communications via discussion lists and communities. As a result, they were able to get accustomed to the new platform than members in the other VKCs without this prior experience.

The S/HE VKC consisted mostly of field workers in grassroots organisations. It is likely that this group was not very experienced with virtual communities and online communications. A very typical example is the fact that most of the respondents of the online survey indicated that they were interested in printed material and not in online resources. From this we can conclude that a regular log-on to and participation in online discussion is probably new for most of these members, and is not part of a daily or weekly routine.

3) Community moderation a specialised skill
The moderators themselves also evaluated their role in this pilot project. Their conclusion was that they would have liked better preparation in terms of moderation of their community.

Although moderation is a skill largely acquired 'learning by doing', the moderators' advice to new moderators would be to spend more time in advance analysing the dynamics of a community, to learn more about trust building, identifying members' expectations, clarifying goals, tackling 'lurking', and other issues which are frequently experienced in online communities.

4) Adopt appropriate technology and a suitable platform
Although the platform had many possibilities, the question remains as to whether these options were all useful for the purpose of virtual knowledge communities or was

actually better suited to online education. In particular, members experienced some difficulties with up- and downloading of documents and cases. The 'comment' function on messages was not understood very well and had certain disadvantages (for instance, the platform made it possible to comment on a message, but had the disadvantage that the comment was then hidden behind a message). In particular, the members and moderators missed the lack of instant messaging. Therefore, it was decided to move the *i*Management community to the Dgroups platform.

Ultimately, we think that a combination of these four factors lies at the basis for failure versus success. We did struggle with the development and operation of the VKCs, and are happy that one of them survived. We are looking forward to the information and knowledge exchanged via this community.

Conclusion

Through a pilot project, KIT ILS wanted to gain experience with online knowledge communities. The experience was very valuable indeed and taught us some interesting lessons which might help to prepare future online learning experiences and assist future moderators with their communities.

We concluded that a needs assessment is very valuable, even for a relatively short-term pilot project. Further, the target group's experience in handling online information exchange is an important success factor, and last, the experiences and ambitions of the moderators themselves need to be taken into account.

Overall, it was beneficial for us to carry out this project. Besides the continuation of the *i*M VKC, the moderators have gained experience with online communities and most likely will use this experience to start, in cooperation with partners in the South, new discussion communities. Despite the bumps along the road which led us to learn these lessons, we are convinced that online communities have great potential in our field of work.

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Abstract

This article analyses the development of three online communities, facilitated by KIT Information & Library Services. The development of these communities started in 2003, with the objective to exchange information with partners in developing countries on Information Management, Gender, Society and Development, and Sexual Health. A year later the platform was designed and online operations of the communities could start. After a pilot period of 20 weeks, an evaluation was carried out. This article looks at the objectives behind the launch of these online communities, describes why the development took seven months, and discloses the evaluation results. It concludes with reasons why two of the three communities were closed down, explores whether this could have been prevented and draws the lessons learned from the exercise.

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Designing sustainable communities of practice at CARE

Rohit Ramaswamy, Graeme Storer and Romeck Van Zeyl

Introduction

This paper describes an approach for creating, managing and sustaining communities of practice (CoPs) to generate and share strategic knowledge at CARE International. This approach has been recently piloted by CARE's Asian Regional Management Unit in Bangkok, and two communities consisting of members from 7 CARE country offices in Asia (India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Sri Lanka) have been successfully launched. If the pilots continue to remain successful, this approach will be disseminated across all of CARE as a best practice for creating a sustainable culture of learning. This approach should also be relevant to any organization that is distributed globally and has limited resources to hire dedicated knowledge management resources. In this paper, we describe the organizational imperatives that defined our approach and present a model that outlines the steps we have followed. We also describe our methodology for implementing the model in our pilot, and share some lessons learned and next steps.

We will begin this paper by defining what we understand by communities of practice (CoP). Definitions of CoPs abound in the knowledge management literature – for our purposes, we use one proposed by Nickols (2000) that states:

> *Communities of practice are groups of people in organizations that form to share what they know, to learn from one another regarding some aspects of their work and to provide a social context for that work.*

Background

CARE is an international, non-governmental relief and development agency working in 70 of the world's poorest countries. Founded in 1945, CARE began with the distribution of food packages to World War II refugees. Today, it supports nearly 900 projects worldwide that reach more than 45 million people. CARE's vision, adopted in 1999, calls for the organization to be a partner of choice and global force contributing to a world where poverty has been overcome and people live in dignity and security.

In the past 10 years, CARE's development approach has evolved to keep pace with changes in theories of poverty and development. As the world view of development has moved from alleviating poverty by providing relief to eliminating poverty by strengthening government systems and by empowering the poor, CARE's programming is moving away from a sole focus on improving household livelihoods to an additional emphasis on supporting people's efforts to take control of their lives

and end inequality and discrimination, as well as creating a sound enabling environment that is responsive and responsible to constituents.

The common focus on underlying causes and rights has resulted in greater similarity in programming approaches across the diverse CARE offices than ever before. There is therefore a great opportunity to improve the effectiveness of programming by enhancing the ability to quickly share successful field practices across country offices. Moreover, as CARE's programming experience grows along these new themes, it becomes equally important to be able to share these practices with the broader development community. There is therefore a strong need now to develop the processes and structures to support organizational learning at CARE.

Integral to these rights based approaches to programming is to allow the communities to learn and gain strength from each other and for CARE to incorporate learning from its community experience in future programmes. This results in a need to develop the processes and structures to support social learning at CARE.

Knowledge management efforts at CARE

CARE has been seriously engaged in knowledge management activities for the past two years. These activities have focused both on social and organizational components. Since CARE is a widely distributed organization, and country offices have a lot of autonomy in deciding their own strategy, knowledge management initiatives have evolved at CARE from the bottom-up, in different regions and programme units, based on the needs and interests of the local organizations. This paper describes one of these initiatives, sponsored by the Asian Regional Management Unit, to develop communities of practice. Other initiatives focus on approaches to promote learning among the communities served by CARE and its NGO partners in the region, activities related to knowledge sharing within country offices and between CARE and other development partners, developing multi-media approaches to gathering, documenting and disseminating best practices in the field, and promoting the creation and sharing of innovative programming approaches addressing cross-sectoral themes.

As these individual initiatives progress and come to fruition, the Learning and Organizational Development (L&OD) unit at CARE headquarters in Atlanta is treating them as pilot projects, and is following them through their completion. In 2006, L&OD will evaluate the success of these projects, assess their applicability to other CARE units and regions, and will create a strategic blueprint for knowledge management at CARE that includes these initiatives as examples. The project described in this paper is therefore a building block in CARE's evolving knowledge management journey.

Designing CoPs at CARE

CARE's reputation and credibility derives from its field presence and relations with local communities, grassroots organizations and government agencies. In the new

development environment, it is more necessary than ever for CARE to share innovations from the field. This knowledge acquired in the field is not explicit knowledge that can be transmitted through training programmes or manuals. Rather, it is tacit knowledge situated in the experience of CARE field staff and of CARE's partners which can be best shared by people coming together and sharing stories. Therefore, it is important to create, encourage and sustain CoPs in CARE at this time as a supplement to traditional skill and capacity building activities.

As Wenger (1999) has described, CoPs can spontaneously emerge in any organization where there is everyday interaction between people engaged in a common line of work. In organizations where people performing similar work activities are located in the same geographical space, knowledge sharing through social interactions takes place naturally and randomly as employees run into work mates at lunch and engage in shop talk or colleagues go out for drinks and trade 'war stories'. These interactions typically do not take place at CARE. This is because CARE is such a highly distributed organization that there are usually not enough people within a country office in a single line of practice to form a spontaneous community. Therefore, communities within CARE are unlikely to spring up without some kind of external design.

Apart from the issue of geographical dispersion, there is another reason why communities of practice at CARE need to be designed. It is an organizational objective to create communities that bring together everyone who can potentially contribute to the community's knowledge sharing activities. Spontaneous communities that form through random interactions may not support this because membership may depend on one's social network and social skills at building such networks. In the communities we seek to build at CARE, the core community will consist of potential members from around the world who are selected from their country offices because of their expertise in the particular topic area. The core community will be primarily responsible for on-going interaction and knowledge sharing activities. Once the core community has been established, membership can then be opened to the wider population within and outside CARE.

Design is important, but it is equally important not to over-design. As Wenger (1998) states, we need a 'balance between design and emergence'. Particularly, we must not forget two key aspects of CoPs that gives successful communities their essence and dynamism. The first is that learning in communities is a social process, and learning takes place through membership and engagement, not through formal instruction. The second is that learning in communities is facilitated through the creation of a common language, and this language often takes the form of narrative. Story swapping is an important aspect of dialogue in communities, and Lave and Wenger (1991) have observed that the progression of newcomers who are initially peripheral learners to 'old timers' is manifested by the quality and quantity of the stories they tell. The design approach that we have followed supports the creation of a social identity for our communities and should encourage the use of narrative language for communication and interaction.

Role and structure of CoPs at CARE: personal and organizational transformation

Given that CARE country offices operate under very tight resource constraints, a community can be successful only if it can demonstrate that it can add immediate value to areas of strategic importance to CARE. Moreover, CARE does not have the resources for dedicated facilitation of communities. Therefore, CoPs at CARE need to consist of *self-motivated* individuals, who are *passionate* about their area of expertise, and are *committed* to the growth of knowledge in strategic areas of interest to CARE. Thus the formation of communities at CARE is an *active choice* by members from different country offices who want to make the time to engage with each other because they perceive the value of sharing knowledge for themselves and for the organization. Successful communities need to effect an organizational transformation at CARE, where regular interactions between members of different country offices for the purpose of knowledge sharing is not the norm, and where project priorities typically encourage a narrow, dedicated approach. Participation in a CoP is also likely to be a personal transformation for its members as they begin to articulate 'who am I and what do I bring to this work?', rather than just focusing on the what of the work itself.

Because of these considerations, the decision to create a community of practice must be a *voluntary choice* made by the potential members. In organizations where employees engaged in the same practice meet each other every day, this choice eventually gets made over time as a byproduct of the daily interactions. But in CARE's distributed environment, there is no opportunity for this prolonged interaction. Our solution is create a 'crucible' for relationship building through a single, intense, facilitated face-to-face event, a community building workshop, that brings together participants from different country offices who are working on a common theme. In this event, we create the opportunity for potential core community members to build personal connections and to provide them with the opportunity to explore issues of mutual commitment and what a CoP will mean for them.

We expect the output of the workshop to be either the details of what a CoP would look like for the members, and what the next steps are in the creation of such a community, or clearly articulated reasons for why a community of this sort is not appropriate at this time. In order to guide the participants towards this decision, we use a structured approach called the 5-D model which is described in the following section.

The 5-D Model

We have created a 5-step model called the 5-D model to help potential community members design viable communities at CARE and manage them through their life cycle. This model is adapted from the appreciative inquiry approach developed by Cooperrider and Srivastava (1987). This approach is implemented through the 4-D cycle of *Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny* (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2003). The similarity between the activities described in this paper and some of the

appreciative inquiry concepts made it logical to adopt a modified version of the 4-D cycle as our framework.

The 5-D model has its theoretical basis on research by Lave and Wenger (1991) and by the Institute of Research in Learning at Stanford University (see Abbott, 1996). This research proposes that learning is a social process, and that learning is an act of membership in a CoP. The extent to which one learns depends on the extent to which one wishes to engage in the community, and therefore learning becomes transformed into a personal choice about engagement. The idea behind this model is that individuals form a community, and that it is not possible for individuals to engage in a CoP unless they explore their own journey around their practice. The model uses personal stories as a medium for participants to reflect on their own relationship to the community and then weaves these personal narratives together into a community dream. This dream then serves as the mutually created 'essence' of the CoP that the participants draw on to design and plan the ongoing activities of the community. At the time of writing this paper, we have tested the first four steps of the 5D model in a community building workshop in Bangkok. Below, we will describe how we did this in greater detail.

An outline of the model is shown in Figure 1 below and involves the following steps;

- *Discover* – Exploring relationship to community through individual narratives;
- *Dream* – Synthesizing individual narratives into a community story around joint purpose and mutual engagement;
- *Design* – Developing processes for the ongoing operations of the community;
- *Document* – Engaging in learning and documenting knowledge; and
- *Disseminate* – Dissemination of the community's learning.

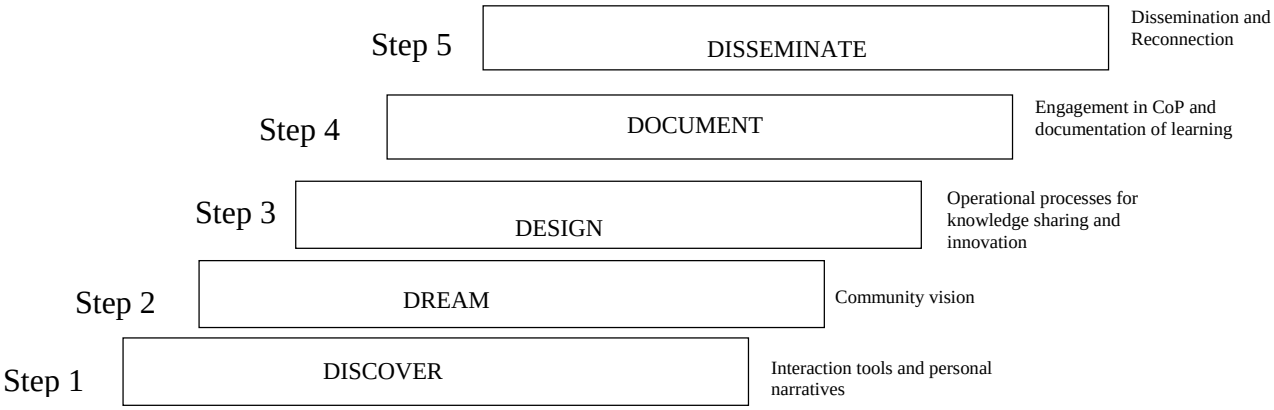

Figure 1: **5 D Model for designing and managing sustainable communities**

The first three steps of the model refer to the design of communities and the last two steps to their ongoing management.

Discovering and dreaming through telling stories

The first three steps of the 5D model are implemented in a three day community building workshop, similar to the one we recently held in Bangkok. At this workshop, we create opportunities for the participants to develop deep personal connections with

each other. As we described earlier, the mode of interaction is through telling stories, and the participants' progress through the workshop by telling stories to each other about themselves and their relationship to a CoP. The sessions progress from the personal to organizational to allow the participants to explore personal themes before they get into the content areas of their practice. Through a sequence of four sessions, participants tell each other stories reflecting on the following questions:

- What is the journey that brought me here and what is my reason for being here?
- What does being in a community mean for me?
- What role do I play within my community and how do I connect my community to the outside world?
- What is my practice, and what is my dream for a CoP

All storytelling activities in the workshop are conducted in groups of three, or triads. We call these triads 'story circles' or 'inquiry groups'. The first title refers explicitly to the element of storytelling or performance. The second title is used to emphasize the exploratory nature of telling stories. Stories are not - unless told in a professional theatre context - readymade pieces but come into being in the interaction between speaker and listener. Therefore, if our purpose is to learn to elicit stories from others, as well as tell them in the context of a community of practice, it is important to have an understanding of what attitude and listening skills help the storyteller to tell a story in a way that is personal and alive.

In keeping with this idea, we emphasize the difference that Steve Denning (2000) makes between stories with an 'S' and stories with an 's'. The former are grand epics that require heroes and villains and themes of deep societal importance; the latter could be narratives describing single anecdotes that have personal significance. Throughout the workshop, we emphasize the small stories. The participants are first required to ask themselves: 'what interests you about this story?' By reflecting on this question, the story teller is encouraged to first reflect on his or her own passion, and then to tell the story by being present with that passion. The idea is that if the story is of deep interest to the storyteller, then this interest will manifest itself in the story, no matter how small the story is, and will enable the story teller to connect with the listener.

On the other hand, a story that is not interesting to the storyteller will need to be 'performed' to keep the listener connected. Analogous to the idea of the 'S' and 's', we introduce the participants to the idea of performance with a 'P' and performance with a 'p'. 'P' stories are those that are intended to impress the listener with the talent and capability of the storyteller; 'p' stories are those that focus on the connection between the listener and the storyteller. Participants are encouraged to focus on telling 'p' and 's' stories.

Grounding the story in community: the role of the witness

The objective of the storytelling sessions is to create a web of stories that connect the members of the community to each other. The telling of the story is just one part of the picture. In order for the story to be received into the community, there has to be a

listener who witnesses the story. Witnessing is a complementary activity to story telling. All storytelling requires a witness but, in common practice, the witness is focused on the usefulness of the story, on having opinions and on articulating them. Our approach to witnessing helps cut through these tendencies by asking participants to suspend judgment and create a space in which people will feel heard and appreciated, rather than engaging in performance assessment.

Each storytelling triad involves a structured interaction between the three members. One member of the triad is the storyteller. The other two members are witnesses who honour and receive the story being told. For each storytelling session in the workshop, the witnesses receive specific instructions about how to give feedback. The feedback focuses on the impact of the story and of the speaker on the witness. The participants take turns at playing each of these roles.

At the end of each storytelling session, participants are asked to produce an output that captures the essence of core themes of the session. Since the objective of this stage of the workshop is to be non-analytical, participants are asked to document these themes in the form of a 'mnemonic drawing', using multiple media of expression: art, music, drama, photography in addition to just words. In the initial sessions, each participant is encouraged to produce their output. In later sections of the workshop, each triad produces a group drawing that reflects their combined views on the stories told in the circle.

Expanding the role of the witness: the story facilitator and the re-teller

In the initial sessions of the workshop, the witnesses are asked to refrain from providing explicit feedback about the content of the story, and to concentrate only on the process, and on the qualities of the storyteller. This is because people are typically good at asking questions and engaging in dialogue with the storyteller, but are not practiced in silently receiving a story. The witnessing practice creates a space within which the story can first be told without distortion or influence.

However, in order to elicit the key points of a story told in a CoP, it may be necessary to ask questions to elaborate or enhance the story, without influencing its outcome. Moreover, the stories told in a community may not be the narrator's own. As the workshop progresses, the witnesses in the triads begin to play different roles that develop their questioning and re-telling skills.

In one of the triadic sessions, one of the witnesses is asked to take on the role of a 'story facilitator'. The role of this person is to ask questions that support the elaboration of the story but that do not modify the story in any way. The facilitator asks questions only after the narrator has completed the story. The third person in the triad remains a silent witness throughout, and is a respectful observer to both the storytelling and the questioning process.

In the session that explores the re-telling of a story, the triad is asked to select a story that will be shared with another triad. The triad also selects a story teller for the selected story. The storyteller should not be the owner of the story. The selected storyteller first retells the story in the original triad as though it was his or her own.

This allows her/him to internalize the story and to explore its rhythm. The owner of the story provides feedback on how it feels to receive a re-told story and gives permission for the story to be told outside the circle. The storyteller then moves to another triad, and retells the story, but now on behalf of the original owner. Stories that get told in a community belong to everyone, and being able to tell another member's story as though it were one's own, with passion and authenticity, helps to strengthen the bonds that exist within the community.

Bringing it all together – dreaming the community story

In the last two sessions of the storytelling workshop, the participants bring their learning and skills from the previous sessions to create a joint story about their CoP which is a vision, expressed in narrative language, of the organizational transformation the community can bring about through its activities and through the strength of the members' relationships to each other. This story is constructed in two steps.

Step one
In the first step, participants are again asked to assemble in triads. In each triad, the participants are asked to take some reflective personal time and are given the following instructions:

- We will give you a list of values. We would like you to circle three values on that list that resonate with you.
- Invent or imagine a change that you would like to bring about in your work situation in your home country, with which your (as yet imaginary) CoP could help you or support you.
- Let a story form around that in your head – a resistance that you might encounter, and how it might be overcome.
- We ask, for the sake of documenting, that you write the key points of your story on a piece of paper that you can hand over to us later.
- Cut out a piece of fabric and, on that fabric, draw or paint something like a logo or image that is meaningful to you, or that represents something symbolic in for you relationship to CoP.
- When you are finished, come back together in your triads. Take 15 minutes each in which you show the others your little flag or logo, and in which you tell the story of the change you would like to make happen in the future with the help of the CoP as if it had already happened.

In the instructions for this step, we begin to prepare the participants to move from the space of small groups to the world of the larger CoP. In this larger world, the personal identities of the community members, reflected by the individual stories (the 'I' stories), get enhanced and reinforced by the community identity, which is reflected in the created community story (the 'We' story). The core values that each individual assumes and the icon that he or she creates represent the unique and personal contribution that the individual makes to the community. The list of core values is shown below in Figure 5. Figures 6 and 7 show some examples of icons created by the participants.

Creativity	*integrity*	*belonging*	
Compassion	*connection*	*sensitivity*	
Honesty	*courage*	*strength*	
Clarity	*efficiency*	*truth*	
Depth	*joy*	*sexuality*	
Vitality	*effectiveness*	*openness*	
Passion	*warmth*	*accountability*	
Responsibility	*simplicity*	*obedience*	
Spontaneity	*flexibility*	*balance*	
Initiative	*faith*	*sisterhood/brotherhood*	
Peace	*non-violence*	*respect*	
Enthusiasm	*delight*	*adventure*	
Purity	*tenderness*	*gratitude*	
Purposefulness	*willingness*	*communication*	
Synthesis	*intelligence*	*sharing*	
Power	*beauty*	*harmony*	
Trust	*directness*	*play*	
Abundance	*alleviation of suffering*	*forgiveness*	*pleasure*
Lightness	*humour*	*freedom*	*fun*
Health	*understanding*	*healing*	
Inspiration	*education*	*patience*	
Presence	*wholeheartedness*	*commitment*	
Love	*spirituality*	*hope*	

Step two

The second and final step is then to synthesize the individual stories into a single story of the community. This is an un-facilitated session and the participants are given the following instructions:

> *…you will create the story or stories of your CoP. You will first be presenting it to each other, and later to the broader organization. In your story, we want you to talk about the future CoP as though we are living a year from now – in April 2006. We want you to tell us what has been achieved in your workplace and the changes that have been brought about in 2005 as a result of the existence of the CoP. Tell us how the community came to be, what role the CoP has played in influencing the organizational change, how key stakeholders in the organization have interacted with the community and how a resistance or difficulty was overcome.*

The community story is the culmination of the dream step of the 5-D model. The process of creating the story allows the community members to make choices about the options available to them in the future, and provides a medium through which to express these choices. As stated earlier, there is no organizational mandate to create a CoP; this is a decision that is left to the participants. Through the community story, the members can explore whether and the extent to which they wish to commit to the joint enterprise of a CoP.

From dreams to reality – designing the CoP

The completion of the individual and community stories takes us to the end of the dream step of the 5-D model. In the third step, design, the participants are brought

back to earth with a change in the operational paradigm from a narrative, people-centred mode to an analytical, process-centred one. In this step, the community creates the operational processes that are needed to make the dream a reality. The operational processes support the ongoing activities of the community and describe the work activities, organizational roles and technologies that are needed to ensure that knowledge gets created, shared, documented and disseminated. The outputs of this step are, for example, guidelines on how knowledge gets documented, frequency and content of meetings, the media used for sharing and displaying knowledge, the appointment of knowledge managers or champions, and the development of intranets, websites and knowledge management systems.

The design step is planned for the last day of the community building workshop. The community members bring their community story into a planning session. According to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), CoPs consist of three components: a domain that defines the topics that the communities will focus on; the community that defines the members and criteria for membership, and the practice which reflects the language, protocols and procedures used by the community to capture and share knowledge. In the planning session, the community members are asked to create a vision for the community from the key themes captured in the community story. They are then asked to define the domain, the community and the practice that are needed to achieve this vision. The output of this step is a 90-day project plan that outlines how knowledge will be created and shared in one or more knowledge areas of critical importance to the organization.

The planning session is an un-facilitated exercise, but guiding questions are provided to the communities. Some typical questions are:

Strategy overview:
- What change(s) in the work that you do in your country offices will take place in the next 3-6 months because of your CoP?
- Why is the CoP the best way of bringing about this change?
- What is the one thing that I need to do next week to facilitate the CoP?

Sample domain related questions:
- What specific topics do we want to address in our CoP in the next 3-6 months?
- Why are these topics relevant to our organization?
- What kind of influence do we want to have on the organization?
- Who will take leadership in promoting our domain?

Sample community related questions:
- Who will be the members of our CoP in the next 3-6 months?
- How often will the community meet? How will the members connect?
- How can the community balance the needs of various members?
- How will members deal with conflict?
- How will newcomers be introduced into the community?

Sample practice related questions:
- How should we create and document knowledge?

- How should we evaluate the effectiveness of our community in the next 3-6 months?
- How should we ensure on-going connection between the members?
- How should we deal with conflicts between our own work and CoP work?

Sample support related question: What support do we need from our organization to be successful in achieving the changes to our work through our CoP?

Next steps – documentation and dissemination

These steps of the 5-D model are still evolving at CARE. The hypothesis is that if the community building workshop is successful, the community should have the social connections and the operational processes to move forward with its real job of learning.

Documentation
In the documentation step, we monitor the community as it grows and learns. Depending on the nature of the operational processes designed in Step 3, the community members may engage in online discussions, regular conference calls, documentation and publishing of 'knowledge nuggets', mini-conferences and other events that sustain and further learning. During this step, there may not be much oversight of the community, but if a community 'champion' has been designated in Step 3, this person may check in from time to time to address any issues. Peripheral members may join at the community at this time and grow the community. If the community is mature and stable, it may explore opening up membership to other Regional Management Units or to the outside development community.

In this step, the community also documents its knowledge. Depending on the nature of the knowledge and the audience, the documentation can take multiple forms; documents, CDs, digital story boards, audio, video, poster sessions, stories or skits. We give considerable emphasis to non-text based documentation. Resources permitting, we also provide technical support for documentation. Additionally, the knowledge documented by the community should not be restricted only to content: the community building workshop, the process of community building, the discussions during telephone meetings and presentations at face-to-face events are all important pieces of documentation.

Dissemination
The dissemination step has multiple components. Routinely, the activities of this step involve the processes that are needed to ensure that the documented knowledge is shared within and outside CARE. But one of the critical activities of this step is to create face-to-face events such as a community meeting or knowledge fairs at regular intervals of time. At these sessions, community members can share what they have accomplished, assess progress made, re-establish social connections and plan for the future of the community. This face-to-face session should be an open event that anyone can attend. We have planned such a session in CARE for the communities from the Bangkok workshop in spring of 2006.

Where the road leads – thoughts about the future

This paper has described an approach that we have piloted at CARE to build a culture of sustainable organizational learning by developing communities of practice that are connected, motivated and engaged. We believe that our approach has been successful in achieving this goal, based on a sample of comments made by the workshop participants during a debriefing session with senior management:

> *…understanding each other allowed us to bring the individual stories into a collective story. [This] will allow us to reach out to communities and really understand their stories...*
>
> *…we will have to demonstrate that this work is sustainable – that will be the acid test for the organization …and use the skills we have gained about the process to weave story telling into existing forums …not something extra, but integrated into our work…*
> (Participants of the Bangkok seminar 2005)

Since the workshop, the communities have generated plans to connect regularly and to create and share knowledge on topics of strategic relevance to the country offices. For example, the community on Gender and Sexuality has planned the following activities over the next 6 months:

- Create an open forum of discussion for topics related to gender and sexuality, such as violence against women, mainstreaming gender and sexuality in CARE programmes, and documenting best practices in the field;
- Create knowledge that is of relevance and value to the projects that currently address gender and sexuality issues in the CARE programme; and
- Create knowledge that furthers thinking about topics of programmatic relevance to CARE country offices.

As the communities grow and evolve over time, we need to guide them through the last two steps of the 5-D model. We do not have enough data yet to say whether these communities will thrive, or whether organizational pressures and priorities will slowly erode the close bonds we have created among the members. At the time of writing this paper, however, our approach shows promise, and we have come to firmly believe that before we embark on any knowledge sharing initiative, we must take the time to build the social connections between the key protagonists in the knowledge sharing effort. We believe that we have given these communities a strong foundation that will enable their success, despite their geographical distribution. As mentioned earlier in this paper, this project is one knowledge management pilot at CARE. Over the next year, we will observe the progress of these two communities, and evaluate their ability to make a strategic contribution to CARE's programme goals and to transform the way that CARE country offices work together.

In their paper on building sustainable communities, Stuckey and Smith (2004) state that effective community building strategies should focus primarily on personal contact and the development of social capital, and less on technology. This has been our hypothesis as well in designing the approach we have presented in this paper. We

believe that this approach has the potential to become a key part of CARE's knowledge management strategy in the years to come.

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Abstract

This paper describes an approach using story telling developed by CARE to build connections between potential members of distributed communities who do not have the opportunity to meet socially on a regular basis. This approach, based on a 5-step model for community formation and knowledge sharing, called the 5-D model, was recently implemented in a workshop sponsored by CARE's Asian Regional Management Unit in Bangkok, Thailand. This paper presents the details of the workshop and the outcomes, and discusses the viability of this approach for creating vibrant communities that sustain, thrive and function effectively over time.

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Communities of practice for development in the Middle East and North Africa

Erik C. Johnson and Ramla Khalidi

A joint initiative was launched in early 2002 to explore the potential of communities of practice (CoPs) as a tool for capacity building for development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Under the aegis of the Mediterranean Development Forum (MDF), the initiative took the form of a partnership between the World Bank Institute (WBI), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and prominent regional think tanks dedicated to the empowerment of civil society to engage in public policymaking.

CoPs are informal networks of professionals or practitioners who are dedicated to sharing experience and knowledge. In the development field, CoPs often contribute to a more informed dialogue with decision-makers. They also facilitate problem solving among individual members, stimulate learning, promote professional development, address individual questions and generate the type of knowledge that members need in their daily work.

The impetus for this initiative came from a concern among the key stakeholders of the MDF that the MDF was not achieving a lasting impact from its main programme activity, a large-scale regional development conference held once every two years. As year-round, interactive knowledge sharing groups, it was felt that CoPs could complement the large conferences by both generating ideas for the conferences, and by continuing the networking and dialogue that takes place during the events.

The WBI/UNDP collaboration focused on two main activities. The first was a desk study on 'Regional communities of practice' completed in June 2002 (Traboulsi 2002). The second activity was technical and financial support to three regional development related CoPs that were identified through an international competition. Together with the desk study, the experience of the three CoPs has provided WBI and UNDP with lessons on the challenges and opportunities of supporting regional networking activities. This paper highlights those lessons through a review of the progress of the three CoPs, as well as the key findings of the desk study, including an update in 2004 of the 2002 survey.

The experience of MDF-supported CoPs

In an effort to promote regional networking and the exchange of information, MDF agreed to support the work of three regional communities/networks. As already mentioned, one objective of the project was to pilot alternative ways to sustain substantive year-round deliberations. The three communities were identified through a competition and an international call for proposals. Of 25 proposals received, seven

were short-listed. The three winners were selected by an MDF Executive Committee using objective criteria that included: clarity of objectives, focus, leadership, policy impact, use of information technology (IT) tools, regional diversity and realistic budget. Each of the three winners received a small grant amounting to $20,000 USD and technical assistance from WBI and UNDP.

MDF communities of practice profiles

The Community of Practice on Access to Information is a network of researchers, activists and experts focusing on the sharing of information and know-how on campaigning and advocacy for Access to Information Legislation. Hosted by the Lebanese NGO, Lebanese Transparency Association, the network includes members in Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Territories, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Mauritania and Jordan. The network documented, in the form of country reports, the best practices and lessons learned on access to information, and is developing 'model' legislation.

The Sustainable Livelihoods in Drylands Community of Practice brings together professionals from across the MENA region to exchange know-how, build capacities and influence policy toward sustainable livelihoods in drylands. Hosted by the Environment and Sustainable Development Unit of the American University of Beirut, the CoP includes members from Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen, Tunisia, Syria and the Palestinian Territories. It aims at providing an open space for dialogue and knowledge exchange on sustainable livelihoods and human development in drylands.

The Regional Network for Teachers is a network of high school teachers acting as 'lead trainers' to help integrate the use of IT in the classroom. Hosted by the Regional Information Technology and Software Engineering Centre (RITSEC) in Cairo, the network includes members from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. The trainers are expected to support each other through the network and train other teachers in their respective countries.

CoP approaches: what worked and what didn't

Each of the 3 CoPs adopted a different approach based on their unique context. These approaches offer insights into the types of activities CoPs can implement in a start-up phase.

Demand versus supply

Evidence has shown that CoPs are most active and dynamic when there is an expressed need for their existence by the members themselves. As voluntary groupings, their value is only as great as their worth to their members. Two of the pilot CoPs had a clearly identified demand from their members, who had requested a formalization of interactions. The members of these CoPs were familiar with each other from past regional events, or through their professional reputations. The grant was therefore used by these two CoPs to solidify an existing network with a pre-existing identity. The third CoP did not tap into an existing network, but rather sought to create a new network. This more supply-driven approach had mixed results.

Community leaders

Two of the CoPs applied a considerable portion of their funding to cover the costs of the community leaders and community coordinators. The third CoP did not apply the seed funding to staff, but rather covered these costs through the support of their organizational host. The CoPs that specifically allocated funds to community leadership witnessed more dynamic activity over the course of the two years, whereas the activities of the third CoP have all but stopped. Dedicated facilitation, as well as leadership and direction, of the CoP are critical factors to its success. According to the leader of the Sustainable Livelihoods CoP:

> *Leadership is not just about having a dedicated person. Its about having someone in place who has the substantive capacity, animation skills, energy and time to devote to the CoP. In the absence of such leadership, members of the community will lose interest and their focus will be dissipated.*
> (Interview with Dr Rami Zurayk, 30 March 2005)

Workshops

The one CoP that did not place emphasis on community leadership instead invested heavily in a face-to-face workshop of its community members. This workshop was intended to build social capital among community members, enabling them to continue networking after the event. Unfortunately, this investment did not succeed. This is mainly due to a lack of follow-up which left the members without a facilitator to keep them connected. The other two CoPs invested more modestly in face-to-face meetings, attempting to optimize their funding by arranging side meetings during larger events. Funding was thus maximized, and they were able to build on the content being discussed at the larger events as a means of generating content for the CoP. This appeared to be quite a successful strategy.

The content base

The Access to Information CoP focused heavily on generating country reports in its areas of expertise to attract the interest of members and establish a core of knowledge to build on:

> *Commissioning the country reports through the network […] proved to be the right approach to use. The members of the network engaged in discussions and followed up each other's work on Access to Information every time they had the opportunity to meet.*
> (Access to Information 2004)

Another CoP adopted this approach after some time had passed, recognizing the importance of substantive new content to the CoP. For this CoP, however, content was not country-based, but rather focused on sub-themes of the CoP. The third CoP did not invest in any content but instead based its work on content generated by a partner organization. This approach allowed the CoP to start on a clear content-related footing, but it has meant that the CoP has not engaged in knowledge generation of its own.

Policy impact

Two CoPs were successful in achieving some policy impact. Through their network, the Access to Information CoP agreed to work jointly on drafting a model law on

Access to Information which can be used by various countries and organizations. This concrete output with clear policy impact has been a valuable tool for the members and their national partners, and has shown a real value-added for this kind of regional collaboration. The Sustainable Livelihoods CoP has also focused on policy change as it relates to the certification of organic products from dryland areas and developing marketing structures. Focusing on high value initiatives seems to pay off in terms of real change on the ground.

Websites

All of the CoPs developed their own websites as a knowledge repository. Unfortunately, all are static websites with minimal new content added, one of which has been completely stagnant since its creation. While website interactivity represents a higher level of development in the life of a CoP, these websites could be moving in this direction. One of the reasons for this hesitancy is the difficulty that two of the CoPs encountered with e-mail discussions. If the CoPs are unable to sustain interactivity via e-mail, it is unlikely that web interactivity would occur. It seems that, at the initial stages, websites are used as information tools, providing details about the work of the community. These sites are good repositories for any knowledge products developed by the community, such as reports, policy notes, best practice papers and newsletters.

E-mail

Two CoPs have attempted virtual interaction using e-discussions. One CoP took a very informal approach, and saw quite limited response. The other was less formal but still well organized, yet the response was disappointing (though greater than the other CoP). Both CoPs have decided not to attempt another e-discussion at this time. However, one CoP decided to send one-way e-mail alerts to all members with updates on new web content and CoP activities. This may represent a way of building towards a more interactive exchange in the future. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the reasons behind the failure of these e-discussions. Was language a barrier to communication, given that two CoPs mostly used English in their e-mail exchanges? Was access to the Internet and connectivity difficulties an obstacle? Do people prefer oral communication to written communication as reflected in the progress reports of one of the CoPs? Were the topics of discussion chosen not specific enough, too specific, or just not interesting? Was there a critical mass of members on the e-mail network? Is a level of trust needed between the members prior to engaging in e-discussion? All these questions are worth further exploration.

Partnerships

Each of the CoPs worked to establish linkages with other like-minded groups. One CoP was successful in leveraging additional funding resources. Another focused heavily on targeting new and innovative approaches by other agencies in order to build the knowledge base of the CoP (i.e. scientific innovation). In one case, the CoP developed a special project that its members will work on in cooperation with other specialized agencies. Diversifying funding sources has been another important lesson identified by the Sustainable Livelihoods CoP which has managed to build partnerships with donors and with research institutions. By ensuring that the sources of funds are diversified, they have managed to guarantee better chances of sustainability and continuity.

An assessment of impact

After two years of observation, two of the three CoPs have fulfilled the hopes of the project. While providing a basis for community formation, the Network of Teachers did not continue facilitating interaction among community members. The Network became a time-bound initiative that has provided teachers with specific set of knowledge, and then moved on. The hope was that these teachers would share their experiences and spread the word to other teachers in the region. If interaction between the initial 40 teachers still continues, it is not apparent.

The other two CoPs witnessed significant, if slow, progress. The Sustainable Livelihoods in Drylands Community increased its membership and provided an ongoing flow of new knowledge in this relatively undeveloped field. It has established itself as a credible resource on these issues (i.e. via its Best Practice notes) and attracted new support, notably from UNDP's Drylands Development Centre, to ensure its sustainability in the medium term. By establishing links to centres of innovation in other countries (France, Finland and Canada), this CoP is also in an excellent position to spread the use of new approaches (Jamali and Zurayk 2005).

The Access to Information CoP also generated considerable new knowledge in its field, and attracted the attention of others working in the field of transparency and governance in the region, notably through a publication including country case studies. Its work on access to information legislation provides an opportunity for the CoP to have a significant impact on policymaking in the region by developing model legislation for Lebanon that can be used by its members in other countries.

Lessons learned from the MDF Communities Project

The experience of working with these three CoPs revealed several lessons that can be applied to the development of new CoPs, either by their leaders or by other agencies that provide financial or technical assistance. These include:

- A limited understanding of what a CoP entails can significantly affect the relevance and quality of CoP activities. The MDF competition could have benefited from a deliberate process of awareness building on the concepts of CoPs.
- As a result of this limited understanding, CoPs can be easily mistaken for short-term activities, meaning CoPs may get started but that they will not last. Donors who are thinking of supporting CoP activities should be aware of this, and adjust their expectations accordingly.
- The most important issue determining a CoP's success is leadership. A committed, energetic leadership is vital. For potential donors, it is important to gauge the commitment/passion of leaders before deciding to support a CoP.
- An organic need for networking is another critical success factor. While donors can encourage and facilitate existing networking efforts in the region, they should not get involved where demand for networking activities is not clear.
- A solid issue/knowledge base is needed before a community will coalesce. Moreover, interaction should be based on questions that lead to something concrete, like publications or face-to-face meetings, to help the community gel.
- Technology may not play a large role in networking. Despite the existence of advanced, interactive technologies, these do not seem to play a major role in CoP

activities. Such technology may facilitate informal interactions but it is not yet the main basis for community participation.

- There is a strong cost-benefit argument for supporting CoPs for knowledge exchange and learning. Based on the MDF CoP experience, it is clear that the US$20,000 invested in each CoP has had a far greater impact than had it been spent on a time-bound learning event. CoPs have the advantage of being active and adapting over time. A major caveat, however, is that the facilitation of a CoP can be very intensive, and if one were to factor in the value of all of this time, the cost-benefit proposition for the CoP may seem less appealing.

Some of the lessons learned from the MDF CoPs further reinforce the findings of the MENA CoP study. Before drawing a broader set of conclusions from this, the key contextual issues that affect the operations of CoPs in the MENA region will be analyzed.

The MENA regional CoP desk study

Between March and May 2002, WBI and UNDP commissioned a regional consultant to: take stock of existing regional networks and communities of practice; provide an overview of their depth; analyze the experience of establishing and nurturing CoPs and networks in the region; identify their main challenges; and outline the profile and experience of selected CoPs (Traboulsi 2002)[30]

Methodology
The methodology for this research included: review of CoP literature, web research to identify potential existing CoPs, phone interviews with selected institutions with experience facilitating CoPs, circulation of a questionnaire to around 140 networks and potential CoPs in the MENA region, data analysis and development of a summary matrix. Complete information was obtained for a total of 21 regional networks/CoPs, with partial information collected for 15 others.

The same questionnaire that was circulated in the summer of 2002 was sent out again in the summer of 2004[31]. Only 27 of the original 36 respondents replied to this updated survey. Two were removed from the survey due to their global, not regional, focus. Two new CoPs responded, formed as 'splinter-groups' of one of the earlier CoPs. The total number of 2004 respondents was 29. The results of this second survey revealed some changes in CoP activity, membership and geographical reach. The respondents of the two surveys became the focus group of the desk research. Their answers and input informed the analysis and conclusions of the review. Given the relatively small sample of networks/CoPs analysed for this review, their experience may or may not be applicable to CoPs in the MENA region in general.

Several methodological inadequacies have since been pointed out which made it difficult to conduct this research and to make use of the results. These include: the difficulty in accessing CoPs in the region from one central location; the lack of incentives for respondents to reply to e-mail inquiries and questionnaires; the

[30] Research assistants Hanan Toukan and Rana Ksaifi gathered much of the information for the report.
[31] Research assistant Rana Shabb assisted in this part of the project.

problems in understanding the definition of a CoP; the problems in understanding the questions; and the lack of time to interact with respondents to explain the questionnaire and to give them time to respond. As this is the first research undertaking of its kind, many of these challenges were anticipated. Nonetheless, they limited the effectiveness of the outcome.

Origins and questions about CoP existence

Most of the CoPs surveyed in 2002 appeared to be very young structures. Of those who mentioned their inception year, many appear to have developed as of 2000, with very few before that date. Furthermore, of the 25 applicants to the MDF CoP Competition, most could be described as potential CoPs as they had not yet formed, but would do so were they offered the seed-money. The 2004 update partly confirmed this potential nature, in that 4 out of 5 of the non-respondents were from this group. The 2002 and 2004 data confirm the relatively nascent nature of CoPs in the MENA region.

Affiliation and structure

International organizations and foreign aid agencies play an important role in fostering and coaching regional networks and CoPs. However, the 2004 survey revealed that the majority of CoPs were not directly affiliated to these external bodies. Twenty out of 36 groups claimed close established links with independent organizations, while three others considered themselves as fully independent CoPs. However, of the three organizations that claimed to be independent, two were hosted by local organizations (University of Balamand and American University of Beirut), and one was externally linked (World Bank).

Neither the survey responses, nor the additional communications with CoPs, gave due attention to the structure and mode of operation of the surveyed groups. However, it is apparent that some of these CoPs are well-structured groups run by an executive or steering committee. In some cases, these groups have general assemblies or advisory boards formed of key stakeholders. However, nine survey respondents said they had flexible structures while six others indicated that their structures were rather elaborate. Information about the role that moderators, facilitators, or coordinators play in such networks was not available. This is an area deserving of more research.

Host country

Among the focus group, Jordan has attracted and presently hosts the largest number of regional networks (11), followed by Lebanon (8), Egypt (5) and Palestine (3). Both Tunisia and Saudi Arabia host one CoP each. The remaining five groups are hosted outside of the MENA region. There could be several reasons for this distribution. The background research may have focused on these countries because of the researchers' presence in Beirut. Moreover, as most of the Internet searching was conducted in English, this may have excluded French-speaking CoPs in the Maghreb. Other considerations include the Levant's active and vocal civil society, and the fact that these countries are generally the recipients of larger amounts of foreign aid.

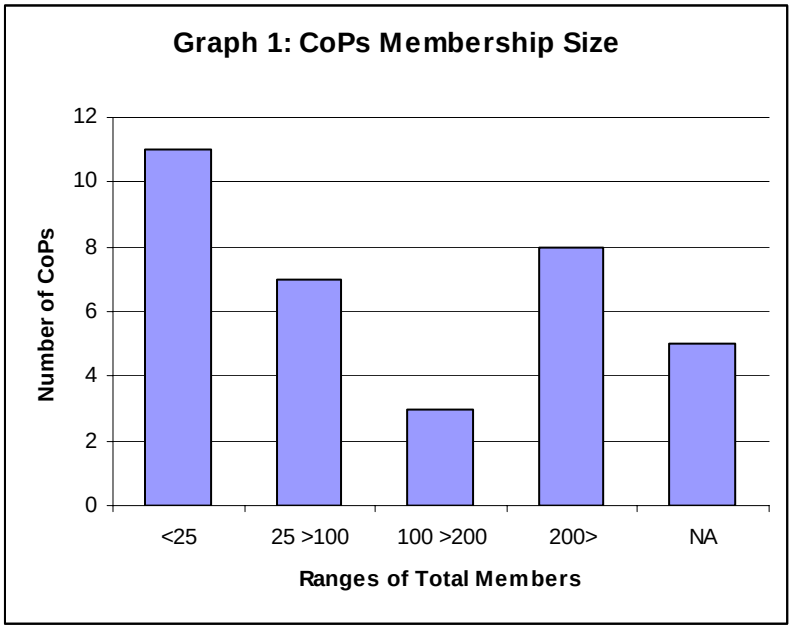
Regional coverage

The number of countries covered by each CoP varies from five to 16 countries. The countries that are most frequently included as members of the CoPs are Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Palestine, followed by Morocco and Tunisia. These are followed

by Yemen, Sudan, Syria and Algeria together with the six Arab Gulf countries. Several CoPs also include non-Arabic countries, such as Iran, Israel and Turkey.

Membership

Membership was difficult to gage, due to the CoPs' differing ways of counting their members. Some counted individuals, others organizations, and still others the number of subscribers to e-mail lists (see Graph 1 for a breakdown of members per CoP). Due to the more informal nature of CoPs, some do not keep rosters of members or collect membership dues like formal associations. As a result, it is difficult to know exactly what the membership of a CoP is at any given time.



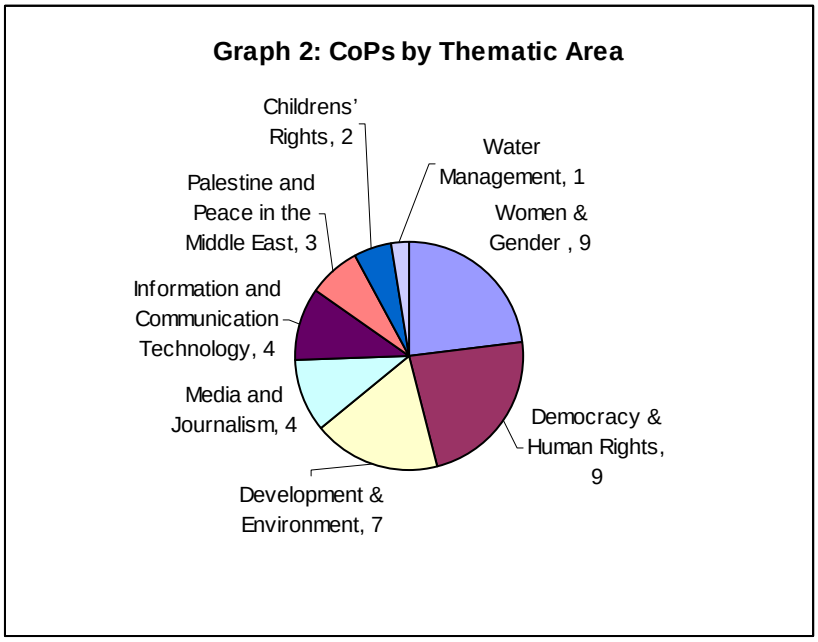
Despite these inconsistencies, the survey showed changes from 2002-2004. Nine of the 34 original groups reported increases in membership. One CoP, Aman, reported a jump from 767 to 1,250 members. Two groups reported a decrease in membership.

The profiles of CoP members are also diverse, including: government employees, researchers, academics, engineers, NGO staff, media, lawyers, development consultants, education professionals, business people, all types of practitioners and activists (human and children rights, women and gender, environment, development). In some cases, CoP members come from the same uniform practitioner groups, such as lawyers, journalists, and IT professions. In other cases, CoP members cut across professions and are motivated by their interest in a particular issue.

Thematic focus

The central themes for networks/CoPs include women and gender equality, human rights and democracy, and sustainable development. These themes seem to be in harmony with the priorities of a larger segment of the NGO sector in the region and within the international aid community. Interest in networking for exchange of knowledge around other themes is minor and has mainly originated from professionals involved in fields of work such as water management, IT, business promotion, and the media. (See Graph 2 for a breakdown of CoPs surveyed by theme.)

A correlation was apparent between the MDF proposals and the regional activities of the UNDP, World Bank and the European Union. In most applications, the creation of the CoP or the new regional network is described as linked to regional conferences and workshops sponsored and supported by international organizations.



Strategy and types of activities

In terms of their overall strategic orientation, the overwhelming majority of MENA CoPs pursue a combined policy and practice approach. In 2002, of 21 survey respondents, only one CoP indicated that it was exclusively policy oriented, and only three were focused on the exchange of practices. This orientation shifted slightly toward a policy orientation in 2004, with four CoPs focusing exclusively on policy and one focusing on the exchange of practices only. The majority of respondents indicated that they were involved in both policy and practice.

When reviewing specific types of activities, it was evident that networking for the purpose of learning takes on very different forms in the region. However, these activities are mainly conventional, combining meetings, conferences and the exchange of information through publications and newsletters. Chatting and conferencing through websites remains limited. Information gathered from the review supported previous findings that the most interesting networking often occurs informally, peripheral to regional meetings and conferences.

The following specific tools and activities were mentioned in the survey responses:

Real-time chatting and message boards;
Petitions;
Regular polls;
Electronic emailing of information;
Publications; and
Conferences, workshops and meetings (video and face-to-face).

Intensity of interaction

Due to the inconsistency of responses in the survey regarding the intensity and frequency of exchanges and interactions, it is difficult to make use of the responses in this analysis. It is hard to determine the actual quantity of e-mail exchanges by either source or geographical spread. Respondents also did not distinguish between administrative/management and knowledge/practice focused exchanges. Nonetheless, it was surprising to find that six regional networks were not involved in any substantial e-mail exchanges.

In 2002, 12 CoPs considered their activity to be not only 'reactive' (i.e. responding to inquiries), but also 'interactive' (i.e. ongoing exchange of ideas and information). The 2004 survey revealed the following breakdown:

Reactive: 16, of which 1 was exclusively reactive; and
Interactive: 22, of which 7 were exclusively interactive.

Although lacking an agreed-upon definition of interactive, informal discussions with some CoP members indicated that e-mail is still not completely integrated into CoP work patterns. Some expressed misgivings about sending e-mail messages to a group, when its members may not be fully known. This emphasizes importance of building trust within a community and ensuring that members feel confident and comfortable contributing.

Strengths, weaknesses and impact

Given that CoPs are a relatively new phenomenon in the region, it is difficult to assess the impact they are having, or to systematically assess their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, respondents indicated in their replies that impact is not yet a priority issue for them. They are more concerned with the operational issues of getting the CoP up and running. Nonetheless, most of those surveyed did respond to questions regarding their strengths and weaknesses, though their answers were generally vague and brief.

Two respondents cited their global networks and an outreach approach as strengths. One respondent mentioned the support the CoP received from a UN agency, and three respondents said that their strong point was in relation to their ways of working: their structures, core partnerships and creative approach. Another respondent indicated that the CoP's main strength came from being decentralized and having a flexible structure.

In terms of weaknesses, most respondents referred to their limited material capacity and resources. One respondent noted the narrow membership base of the CoP, stressing the need to engage in recruitment. Three other respondents indicated that their main weaknesses were not yet having a well-developed structure.

Other respondents pointed out to the limited usage of e-mail and Internet browsing in the Arab world, as well as the generally limited communication infrastructure. One respondent recognized the need to be more focused in the CoP's work, while another respondent acknowledged a key weakness in not being capable to monitor its activities.

Obstacles to CoP growth in the MENA region

As the previous sections illustrate, development-oriented CoPs and regional networks in the MENA region are still in the early stages of development, and face significant challenges and growing pains. The following paragraphs examine some of the key constraints that may limit the development of these new groups.

One of the most significant, and widely recognized obstacles to knowledge sharing is government control of information (McCann and Johnson *In press*). In countries where citizens are free to express their views on policy issues, there is a more dynamic flow of ideas. In 'closed societies', the government monitors the dissemination of information, using official censorship and coercive tactics to prevent the dissemination of opposing views. Many countries in the MENA region fall into this category. This political atmosphere discourages the kind of networking and knowledge exchange that CoPs seek to stimulate. This has been noted in several studies of NGOs in the region, many of whom indicated that the exchange of knowledge and learning plays a limited role in their organizational strategies (El-Baz 1994).

One area where government censorship has been on the rise is on the Internet. While increasingly difficult to control, government officials still attempt to block certain websites and web activity, and monitor websites. There are also governmental concerns regarding the use of the Internet as a tool for building online communities of radicals (Mandaville 2001). Concern for such developments may be over-inflated with many highlighting the moderating effect of the Internet. Nonetheless, citizens of Arab countries are aware of the watchful eye of government on the Internet, and would, therefore, be more reluctant to engage in the open and frank exchanges of views that CoPs engender.

Statistics show that Arab states are low in use of the Internet, compared to other regions of the world. Although Arab countries rank higher than Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America in the number of personal computers (PCs) per 1,000 people, the region ranks lowest in terms of the number of Internet users per 1,000 people (UNDP 2002). This substantially affects the extent to which people in the MENA region can engage in online networking, and helps to explain why regional CoP activity in the region is low.

The limited use of the Arabic language in generating and disseminating knowledge both on the Internet and in print, restricts the potential audience for CoP and network members in the MENA region. All of UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports have argued for a concerted effort to generate more content in Arabic on the internet, given the potential of this new medium for development in the region. The lack of Arabic content is partly the result of the difficulties of working with html in Arabic. This has created a self-perpetuating problem because online communities do not have the specialized scientific or educational materials they need to engage in electronic knowledge exchange in Arabic. They will therefore be more likely to use English or French, thus marginalizing some segments of society and restricting involvement to the more educated classes who are comfortable working in a foreign language.

Future directions for MENA CoPs

As the results of the 2002 desk study (Traboulsi 2002) and the experience of the 3 MDF supported-communities reveal, regional CoPs/networks are still a relatively new phenomenon, yet they are contributing significantly to development in the MENA region. CoPs fill a gap in development approaches between the more traditional policy advocacy networks and structured, time-bound learning events. They network practitioners together for the purpose of learning.

Over the last ten or so years, many donor agencies have increased their support for knowledge-based activities. While Simon McGrath's and Kenneth King's analysis of donor assistance to knowledge-based activities is generally critical of the overly internal focus of this assistance, they are supportive of activities which they refer to as 'external knowledge-based aid' (McGrath and King 2004) These include activities such as CoPs which facilitate multidirectional, South-South knowledge exchange.

This is, in fact, a direction which institutions such as the World Bank and the UNDP are exploring. The significant experience which has been accumulated from internal CoPs (known in UNDP as 'knowledge networks' and in the World Bank as 'thematic groups') is now being transferred to communities of external clients and partners. In order to advance the work which has already taken place in the MENA region, the following elements need to be taken into account, particularly by donors seeking to support these kinds of initiatives:

- Improve awareness/understanding of CoPs by translating and disseminating papers and toolkits on knowledge management and the role of CoPs into Arabic.
- Conduct additional research into the operations of CoPs, looking more closely at the role which is played by moderators and incentives that attract members. A more in-depth look at the impact that these groups have on learning outcomes would also be useful.
- Identify the organic need for focused CoPs. Creating supply-driven networks will usually lead to failure.
- Conduct practical skill building and leadership training workshops on the facilitation of CoPs among CoP leaders and moderators in order to stimulate cross-learning and mentoring.
- Support CoPs to build partnerships with like-minded networks globally.
- Support the diversification of funding resources to improve sustainability.
- Encourage the focus of groups on specific products or services that bring tangible benefits to the members.
- Support initiatives with high policy impact.
- Distill and codify lessons of good practices and successful regional networking as examples for similar initiatives.
- Ensure context-appropriate IT solutions.
- Disseminate existing tools for measuring CoP effectiveness and impact.

Conclusions

The 2003 Arab Human Development Report issues a sort of 'call to action' for citizens of the MENA region. It states that:

> *Without a strong and growing contemporary knowledge base of their own, Arab countries will be absorbed into the international knowledge society as passive consumers of other countries' proprietary knowledge, technology and services…On the other hand, Arab countries can avert this passive fate by indigenizing knowledge and technology and developing the necessary absorptive, adaptive and innovative capacities and structures, which offer them the opportunity to participate proactively in the vigorously growing global knowledge society from a position of dignity and strength.*
> (UNDP 2003)

Communities of practice and other forms of networking offer one way of exploiting these opportunities. With what we know about the barriers to progress, and the keys to success, the MENA region is poised to take greater advantage of this new knowledge tool.

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Abstract
Development-oriented communities of practice (CoPs) are relatively new to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. A number of international agencies have tried to promote the concept of CoPs as a means to enhance the cross-fertilization of experiences, and promote the exchange of development knowledge. However, most of this work has been focused on the internal business of these agencies. A joint World Bank Institute-UNDP project implemented in 2003-2004 sought to better understand the scope of CoP activities in the MENA region, the environment which shapes their operations, and their potential as development actors. To do this, they conducted a survey of all of the entities they could find which seemed to fit the definition of a CoP, while also providing seed money and technical assistance for the establishment of three pilot regional CoPs. The survey revealed a relatively barren landscape in which CoPs have scarcely begun to emerge in the region as a result of barriers such as access to the Internet, limited translation into Arabic, a hesitation to share substantive lessons via the Internet and a limited understanding of the CoP concept itself. Although provided with similar assistance and funds, the three CoPs had very difference experiences and provide important lessons to those working in the field. Different factors were found to affect the success of the CoPs. Ownership, capacity building, language, IT skills, focus, product, vision and leadership were all found to have profound influence on budding CoPs. Surprisingly, although funds are important, they are not a determining factor in the success or failure of a CoP. The project also found nascent interest in the ideas of knowledge management, but much awareness raising and promotion is still necessary.

About the authors

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"KM4dev: a community of development practitioners sharing experiences on Knowledge Management approaches"

Interview with Lucie Lamoureux

For the first issue of KM4D Journal, whom better to interview than Lucie Lamoureux, the moderator of the journal's home base *Knowledge Management for Development community* (KM4Dev)? KM4Dev – think you know the community? Test your knowledge as Lucie unveils the background and development of KM4Dev, and reveals what we can expect from it in the next few months.

How would you describe the focus of the KM4dev-community?
Members seek to exchange thoughts and experiences on issues they face in their work related to knowledge management (KM) and knowledge sharing (KS); they ask each other for advice and obtain quick responses from their peers: development practitioners dealing with similar challenges.

It originated at a time when there was no other forum like it, so it was easy to carve out its own niche.

> *"Just letting me keep track of some of the current thinking and keeping me alert to the fact that others are working (and struggling) with similar issues"*
> Catherine Kenyatta, International Centre for Research in Agroforestry, Kenya

So how did it come about?
The community came about quite organically, following the first two KM workshops that Bellanet co-organized back in 2000, at the demand of the participants who wanted to keep on discussing and sharing experiences around these issues. The KM4dev community continues to grow through word of mouth, face-to-face workshops, even Internet searches. It still amazes me that people find out about us and join every week. There are currently about 3 new members per week.

> *"Being a member of the community has helped me gain a greater understanding of knowledge management in the context of a development-oriented organization such as ours, and has offered me some insight into tools and techniques to promote knowledge management and sharing"*
>
> Paul Neate, International Plant Genetic Resources Institute, Italy

Can you describe what kind of members the community comprises? How many members are there?
When it first started out, the members were the participants from the first workshops, mainly from Northern-based, large bilateral and multi-lateral agencies or big non-governmental organizations. They were also primarily people who had the responsibility for KM or KS in their institution. The trend over the last couple of years has been to see new members coming from programme sections of different

organisations, so less 'process' people and more 'content' people, making it even more interesting because there is less 'preaching to the converted'.

Nowadays KM4dev members are also more geographically dispersed (about 65% Northern versus 35% Southern–based) and range from large UN agencies to small NGOs, although there is still a predominance of larger organizations. The member profiles have also diversified: nowadays the community includes academics, development consultants, students, and even KM specialists from outside international development, who have a personal interest in the field. There are currently approximately 300 members on the mailing list and 500 users registered on the www.km4dev.org website.

> *"I have learnt a lot about KM which I had no idea of before, also become friends with colleagues working in KM through attending the KM workshop in Nepal last year and through the listserv. It is very helpful for me in my work and increases my knowledge"*
> Tanya Huq Shahriar, Marie Stopes Clinic Society, Bangladesh

So those are KM4dev's main communication tools?
Yes, the KM4dev mailing list is the ongoing discussion forum. The KM4dev.org website is a repository of documents, links, news, as well as member profiles, all of which the community can post themselves. You can also find all the outputs and photos from prior face-to-face workshops. The annual face-to-face workshop is – of course – an important communication tool as well! Those meetings are really important for developing relationships between members of the community and build trust.

> "Through this community, I have discovered some of the most compelling and meaningful KM discussions, examples, and stories that exist in the whole world. I have been involved in the planning stages of a couple of local U.S. projects devoted to infrastructure needs in development, and many members of this list have been generous advisors and contributors to my knowledge base and capabilities"
> Barbara Weaver Smith. Smith Weaver Smith Inc.. USA

What do you think are the benefits of being part of this community?
I think that KM4dev members really value learning from their peers and are eager to ask for assistance in solving problems. This is especially true in face-to-face workshops but also occurs a lot online. The trust level is actually quite high online, which I find amazing as many people have never met face-to-face. I think that there is a general consensus that dealing with knowledge management/knowledge sharing in international development is rather complex, so belonging to such a community can be quite useful in making your way around the challenges.

> *"It makes my life easier by giving a lot of legitimacy to things I'm doing. Time and again, I get the benediction from Helvetas thanks to the fact that I have an inestimable community of professionals backing me, whose expertise and opinion I can refer to"*
> Marc Steinlin, Helvetas, Switzerland

What have been the main challenges for the community, and what (creative) solutions have been found to deal with these?

Until May 2004, I was the sole facilitator of KM4dev and found it quite a challenge as I am basically doing it on a (very) part-time basis. I asked for volunteers who wanted to become actively involved and 7-8 people came forward. We set up a core group and those interested have come up with what they want to do to support KM4dev, including helping facilitate, writing case studies, do interviews with well-known KM people, etc. Their input has been wonderful for the growth of the community.

Also, a big challenge is to engage members who can only participate online, who have not been to any workshops and won't be able to, for example due to financial restrictions. We have tried to get members to provide input into the development of workshop agendas online, as well as sending draft notes at the end of each day during the events so everyone can feel at least a bit more a part of them.

> *"There's a pretty big gap between those members of the group who have met face-to-face and communicate through the list as a means to continue such face-to-face communications and those, including myself, who are interested in the issues but not directly involved in KM programs/initiatives, acting more like lurkers than engaged members of a community of practice"* - Barbara Filip, Knowledge for Development, LLC, USA

We've also tried having online events such as electronic Peer Assists but it is difficult to avoid that two-tiered feeling between those who know each other in person and those who don't. The face-to-face events do have higher "bandwidth", so to speak.

Lucie, if you were to choose a title for the community now, would it still be KM4dev?

That's a good question, and it tends to come up regularly! Back in 2000, KM was the term that was used to refer to the type of approaches, methods and tools that we are (still) talking about. Of course, KM is both very much associated with the business world *and* is somewhat of a misnomer, as it is questionable as to whether knowledge *can* be managed!

If we had to choose today, I think I would suggest using KS4dev instead, as much of our focus is on knowledge sharing processes and approaches. But we are in a sense stuck with the name, as it has become a 'brand' in a way.

What have recently been the most active discussion topics in the community?

It's funny - there seem to be two strands of questions: those that are more theoretical and/or philosophical, and those that are very practical and concrete. We've seen very lively discussions within both. For the former, an example is a discussion around KS culture within organizations, which has come up a couple of times; or, recently, a fascinating one on *know*ledge or *know*-how, versus 'making things happen' – dubbed '*do*ledge' by the community. As for the latter, more concrete type of discussions, there just was a very interesting and active thread on where to best locate KM

responsibility within an organization. Any topic around KM/KS strategy is usually often quite popular.

What's coming up for KM4dev?
Well, this Journal is very exciting for the future of KM4dev, as I think it will allow us to deepen our collective knowledge. There is also a project to revisit the FAQ by mining the mailing list archives, which will broaden the community's knowledge base. I'm also looking forward to the next face-to-face workshop, taking place in Geneva in June. One idea that was raised was to use the self-assessment methodology to measure strengths and weaknesses in key KM competencies, offering the community a concrete way of helping each other based on these strengths and weaknesses. I think that has the potential to be a really useful tool for KM4dev.

Do you have any anecdotes to share?
I find it amusing that certain topics almost systematically bring out some community members! For example, some people are really into the technology, while others very much on the KS culture side, and – after a few years of doing this – I can now anticipate who will participate in each of these specific discussion threads! Of course, it sounds like I'm stereotyping but it's great that people are passionate about certain issues. I'm also often surprised at who is subscribed to KM4Dev… I see a contribution go by and say, "wow, this person is on the list!", or "cool, (name of organization) is now actively interested in KS approaches". That really makes my day!

To join the KM4Dev mailing list, send a blank message to:
subscribe-km4dev-l@lyris.bellanet.org

Visit the website: http://www.km4dev.org

Lucie Lamoureux is a Senior Program Officer at the Bellanet International Secretariat. She is currently seconded on a part-time basis to IICD in The Hague and based in Brussels. She has been involved with KM4Dev since it's inception in 2000 and acting as lead facilitator since December 2002.
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KM4Dev Community Notes

In this section of the KM4D Journal*, members of KM4Dev reflect on past discussions. In this Issue, Michael Gruber, Knowledge Networking Programme Manager at the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), looks back at the discussion thread he started on where to best locate knowledge networking responsibility within an organization.*

Where to put knowledge networking?

Michael Gruber

The question of where to place knowledge management (KM) functions and responsibilities within an organization is not always easy to answer. Back in February 2005, I started a mini survey on KM4Dev to find out how this issue is dealt with in other organizations in order to better inform our decision here at UNOPS.

The question
The question was to name one of the following departments as the best home for KM and content management:

- Directorate/Executive Office (Chief Executive Officer and Deputy)
- Legal
- Finance (Chief Financial Officer)
- Human Resources
- Procurement
- Information and communication technologies (ICT)s/information technology (IT) (Chief Information Officer)
- External Relations/Public relations/Marketing
- Operations
- Sales

Responses
Altogether 24 responses were received. The responses could be grouped in three different groups:

1. The first group (2 responses) generally considered ‘put it into IT and then it gets done’. These responses emphasize the ‘can do’ mentality of IT and stress the importance of the IT systems in the backend of any KM project.
2. ‘Put all KM activities to the place where the knowledge is’ is the motto of the second group (7 responses) of responses favouring sales, any other part of the operations and marketing as ideal place for knowledge networking activities.
3. The last group (8 responses) wants to place knowledge networking in Directorate/Executive Office to ensure that corporate strategy is influenced accordingly.

My reflections

The discussion showed that there is no ideal department and that the place for KM is determined by a number of different factors. There are advantages and disadvantage to any location. Individual assessment of the situation is needed to balance IT capabilities, business needs and strategic requirements. Generally speaking, colleagues warned not to over-emphasize IT since IT is important to set up the systems but not for everything. A respondent wrote:

> *One location we worked hard to avoid is the Information Management-IT Branch, for fear of being assimilated with knowledge capture and technology.*

This is because users need intense training and perfectly personalized customization in order to work effectively with the systems.

Thus knowledge networking is much more than installing a knowledge base as it involves people. It became clearer over time that one of the best solutions might be to place knowledge networking in the Directorate/Executive Office, installing a Steering Committee that supervises the work of the Knowledge Networking Programme to ensure that all aspects of networking are covered and no department decides solely on its own.

It was definitely useful for me to get the community's feedback on this question. I was really impressed by the number and depth of the replies I received on the above subject, both via the list and directly.

About the author

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Announcements
Next Issue of KM4D Journal

The **second issue** of the KM4Dev e-journal will deal with *Approaches to Promote Knowledge Sharing in International Development Organizations* and will be co-edited by Nathan Russell, Simone Staiger-Rivas, Doug Horton, Lucie Lamoureux, and Allison Hewlitt.

The purpose of this issue is to present some recent experiences with KS and lessons learned by KS practitioners who have been involved in planning, introducing, and mainstreaming KS approaches and processes in development organizations. Papers will outline the organizational settings in which they introduced or developed KS approaches and the relationships between internal and external knowledge sharing in these settings. The use of KS tools and their benefits for these organizations will be analyzed.

Among others the 2nd issue will include the following articles:

- Experiences of an e-learning module on KM applied and used in Southern countries by Jaap Pels from the International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC), and Frank Odhiambo of the Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC),
- Feedback on expertise directories by Mark Winslow, consultant on information and knowledge management for international agricultural development,
- Practical experiences with the use of strategic meetings and workshops as entry points for KS by Nathan Russell, Doug Horton and Simone Staiger from the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), and Allison Hewlitt from Bellanet,
- Implementation of communities of practice at UNDP by Kim Henderson,
- Train4Dev, a joint donor approach for better knowledge sharing and knowledge management from Andreas Jensen from DANIDA.

The issue will also include a story from Steph Colton and Abdulnasser Minkara on the use of oral histories at the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), and two interviews: with Phineas G. Kadenge on the KS strategy of the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), and Ben Ramalingam from ODI on his working paper on knowledge and learning in development organizations.

Expected: September 2005

Announcements
KM4Dev Annual Workshop

ILO, Geneva, Switzerland, 20-21 June 2005

Making the Invisible Visible: Appreciating Cultural Dimensions

The workshop objectives are to understand and appreciate the cultural dimensions to your current work; to improve your ability to see multiple perspectives, multiple cultural dimensions and cultures, through exposure and practice of practical tools and techniques; and thereby improve your ability to act on facets or elements of culture, to become more active and effective in shaping the cultures that shape us.

Why go? There will be many opportunities for learning exchanges between organizations, as well as Reflection / Flash Mob sessions. It will be different than previous workshops as it will have more of a Knowledge Fair flavour, with a lot of informal spaces to share your experiences.

To find out more of resister for this event, please e-mail Alim Khan at g1emp_sfu@ilo.org